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## **Local e-Democracy in Europe: Democratic X-ray as the Basis for Comparative Analysis**

Contemporary approaches to the study of e-democracy concentrate upon three related debates. First, there is a long standing dispute over the utopian or dystopian effects of ICTs on democracy. Second, there is debate over the revolutionary or reactionary consequences of supposedly transformational technologies in an institutional context. Third, there is ongoing disagreement over what constitutes e-democracy and how it relates to other e-government initiatives. This paper goes beyond these normative and deterministic debates by offering a distinctly empirical approach: the democratic X-ray approach focuses on understanding how those who are implementing e-democracy are seeking to enact democracy more widely through their e-democracy ambitions. Consequently, the focus is on what actors are seeking to achieve and how they sequence online devices with existing or new offline democratic practices. From this approach it is possible to develop a more nuanced and sophisticated analysis of how new e-democracy initiatives relate to existing democratic practices and institutions. The paper develops a conceptual framework for understanding the different democratic ambitions of actors and explores the very different ways in which e-democracy is enacting democratic values, sequencing devices and reinforcing or changing democratic institutions in five European countries: Estonia, Hungary, Spain, United Kingdom and Switzerland.

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# Local e-democracy in Europe: Democratic X-ray as the basis for comparative analysis

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## **Abstract**

Contemporary approaches to the study of e-democracy concentrate upon three related debates. First, there is a long standing dispute over the utopian or dystopian effects of ICTs on democracy. Second, there is debate over the revolutionary or reactionary consequences of supposedly transformational technologies in an institutional context. Third, there is ongoing disagreement over what constitutes e-democracy and how it relates to other e-government initiatives. This paper goes beyond these normative and deterministic debates by offering a distinctly empirical approach: the democratic X-ray approach focuses on understanding how those who are implementing e-democracy are seeking to enact democracy more widely through their e-democracy ambitions. Consequently, the focus is on what actors are seeking to achieve and how they sequence online devices with existing or new offline democratic practices. From this approach it is possible to develop a more nuanced and sophisticated analysis of how new e-democracy initiatives relate to existing democratic practices and institutions. The paper develops a conceptual framework for understanding the different democratic ambitions of actors and explores the very different ways in which e-democracy is enacting democratic values, sequencing devices and reinforcing or changing democratic institutions in five European countries: Estonia, Hungary, Spain, United Kingdom and Switzerland.

## Introduction

As electronic democracy (e-democracy) has developed from conceptual hyperbole to 'piecemeal experimentation and embryonic policy' (Coleman and Norris 2005), so governments across Europe have become increasingly interested in how the internet, mobile telecommunications and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) might help them reconnect with citizens and reinvigorate democracy. Despite the hopes and rhetoric of many e-democracy champions, however, there is little evidence that contemporary initiatives are galvanising public engagement and revolutionising political participation. While there have been some successful initiatives, especially those that have provided specialised ways of interacting with particular groups, such limited successes need to be cast alongside the many false dawns that e-democracy's proponents have experienced (Chadwick 2006): experiments with electronic voting have not greatly increased electoral turnout (Electoral-Commission 2003; Kersting and Baldersheim 2004; Trechsel and Mendez 2005), while other forms of electronic participation, such as online discussion forums, political blogs and so on, have enjoyed only patchy success (Wilhelm 2000; Wright 2006). Indeed, while it is possible to point to many successful experiments in the world of e-democracy (cf. OECD, 2003; Clift, 2004), it is much harder to find evidence of a sustained or substantive outcome from any e-democracy initiative.

The limited success of e-democracy initiatives begs the question of whether such initiatives are worth the policy interest or academic attention: is e-democracy simply a technical solution in search of a policy problem? Certainly, e-democracy as it is currently conceived, does little to address the 'big' problems facing democracy in Europe, such as declining participation in formal politics, declining trust in political institutions, alienation and a sense of disenfranchisement among certain groups, and the growth of extremism and racism in many countries (Schmitter, Trechsel, and *al* 2004). However, it is also too soon to dismiss e-democracy, simply because it is not having the impact that many have predicted and others have hoped for (Arterton 1987; Barber 1984; Blumler and Coleman 2001; Laudon 1977; van de Donk and Tops 1995).

This article argues that e-democracy is worthy of academic interest because it provides a unique opportunity to study intentional attempts to reinforce or change democratic practices in particular contexts. In this sense, e-democracy can be a form of X-ray, allowing the focus to be shifted from the outer skin of democratic practices to the real bones of democratic institutions. By using e-democracy as X-ray it becomes possible both to understand the strengths and limitations of contemporary democratic practices and to explore how e-democracy tools are being used as a catalyst for wider democratic change. In particular, it enables a focus upon the intentions of actors who seek to influence democratic practice through e-democracy and a focus on the way in which such devices interact with existing democratic institutions.

This article is concerned with how e-democracy is contributing to the development and practice of democracy. However, it is not concerned simply with how effective e-democracy is in particular contexts or, even, with whether it should be more effective. Instead, its focus is upon democracy more widely and, especially, the functioning of local democracy as an essential component of modern democracies. In this respect, e-democracy is not of interest in its own right but because, as X-ray, it can reveal the underlying attitudes and values of a range of actors who contribute to, or militate against, particular institutions and practices. From this perspective, the real purpose of analysing e-democracy is to develop an understanding of the different ways that a range of actors (elected politicians, appointed officers, community groups, partner

organisations, commercial enterprises and, indeed, citizens themselves) are seeking to shape and realise potentially competing democratic ambitions and institutional forms. Consequently, this article develops both an analytical and methodological framework for exploring these attitudes, values and practices.

The starting point for this analysis is to develop from the X-ray metaphor a more conceptually driven understanding of democratic change, focussing especially on the relationship between long standing institutional structures and intentional change through human agency. This conceptual development is the focus of the first section after this introduction. The article grounds these concepts by comparing 49 different e-democracy developments in five contrasting European countries (Estonia, Hungary, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom), providing, in effect, contrasting X-ray plates for each country. A second section briefly sets out the method adopted while a third section analyses the evidence against the conceptual framework. At one level, the evidence from this research provides a baseline of the state of e-democracy, and the attitudes that are affecting its take-up, in the five countries studied. At another level, however, this analysis provides a deeper understanding of how democracy in each of these countries works because it surfaces the values of different actors in the process of designing in e-democracy. The concluding section, therefore, reflects upon the different pressures on contemporary democratic development and the potential for e-democracy to address them.

### **Beyond contemporary approaches to e-Democracy**

While the literature on ICTS and democracy is vast, three related debates capture much of the concerns around e-democracy. First, there is a long standing discussion on the future of democracy and the potential impact of ICTs, which is effectively captured in the debate around utopian and dystopian perspectives. Second, there is a division between those who perceive the technologies to be fundamentally radical, presenting enormous opportunities for change, and those who argue that the implementation of new technologies inevitably reinforces existing institutional advantages and behaviour: what can be termed revolutionary versus reinforcement arguments. Finally, there is a significant debate around what constitutes e-democracy and how it can be distinguished from other uses of technology in the area of politics and public administration. This section will briefly touch upon each of these debates before demonstrating how the democratic X-ray approach is different.

The first debate lies in the juxtaposition of utopian and dystopian perspectives on the implications of new technologies for democracy (Chadwick 2003). It is captured neatly by van de Donk and Top's (1995) metaphorical distinction between Athenian and Orwellian views of society. Utopian (Athenian) perspectives emphasise the opportunities for more deliberative politics, unmediated by the traditional institutions of democracy, or indeed, for more direct forms of democracy (Budge 1996). In its ideal form, a Habermasian public sphere can emerge in cyberspace, creating the conditions for ideal speech and providing the opportunity for a sustainable and enduring 'public conversation' among citizens (Coleman 2004; Dahlberg 2001). Indeed, it is the potential for the development of a virtual public sphere that is often held up to be the most democratising feature of the internet and related technologies in this utopian tradition (Jensen 2003). Yet others examine the development and potential of virtual political communities as the basis of a modern democracy that is independent, or only loosely coupled, to geography. Such utopian perspectives give a strong normative steer to the desires of many who wish to use the tools of e-democracy to reshape democratic practice.

Dystopian (Orwellian) perspectives, in contrast, highlight the negative effects of the technologies. As well as the problems of differential access that the 'digital divide' gives rise to (Castells 2001), such approaches also highlight the broader social and ethical challenges which ICTs can deliver (6 2004), including their potential to restrict liberty and invade privacy. The normative position of dystopians towards e-democracy is one in which the technologies, at best, are doing little to enhance democracy more generally and, at worst, are actively undermining key institutions of contemporary democracy. This debate between utopians and dystopians has endured because e-democracy implementation has still not advanced to a clear empirical position: if not in its infancy, e-democracy certainly has not reached even adolescence, yet. As a juvenile technology, it is difficult to observe the long term consequences of any specific initiative. However, the debate is useful here because it highlights the uncertain and potentially significant effects that the application of new ICTs, whether intentionally or unintentionally, may have in the political process (Ainsworth, Hardy, and Harley 2005).

A second and linked debate concerns the revolutionary or reactionary influences of technologies on democracy. Among policy makers, there is an explicit assumption that ICTs can have radical and transformational impacts upon political behaviour (Cabinet-Office 2005). Indeed, one of the biggest hopes is that e-voting and e-participation initiatives can re-engage an apathetic public and reach out to disaffected young people and other social groups that are currently disconnected from conventional politics (e-Envoy 2002). Such transformational and revolutionary themes also appear in much of the academic literature (Hazlett and Hill 2003), especially where the technologies are seen specifically as effecting managerially led change (Heeks 2005; Jaeger and Thompson 2003). In short, for many the implementation of ICTs in the public sector provides a unique opportunity to radically change organisational, political and democratic behaviour.

Others, however, are sceptical about the so-called revolutionary effects of new technologies in the political domain, arguing that the technologies become 'normalised' by their social and political context over time (Margolis and Resnick 2000) or, even, that new technological applications and their effects reflect the interests of dominant actors, thereby reinforcing or even aggravating existing socio-political cleavages and patterns of interest (Danziger, Dutton, Kling, and Kraemer 1982; Dutton 1999). These reinforcement arguments observe the limited impact of technologies on broader organisational and political life and recognise the role of institutions in mediating the potentially radical nature of many applications. Such arguments have been lent additional empirical weight in recent studies of e-government, which demonstrate the long term failure of ICTs to radically transform public administration (Kraemer and King 2005). Rather than being inherently revolutionary, therefore, the implementation of ICTs often reflects and advances the interests of dominant powers in the polity.

A synthesis in these debates has, to some extent at least, been achieved by Jane Fountain, where she distinguishes between objective and enacted technologies. Objective technologies refer to such artefacts as the Internet which exist as abstract entities until they are give specific application in an institutional or organisational context. Enacted technologies are the same technologies but mediated through institutional or organisational arrangements to reflect 'the perceptions of users as well as designs and uses in particular settings' (Fountain 2001)p10. Her argument is that, to understand the effects of technologies, we need to understand how they are mediated by the institutional and organisational contexts in which they are implemented. It follows, therefore, that e-democracy innovations are likely to emerge in complex environments and have multiple implications for democratic practice.

While individual initiatives may have specific goals (e.g. enhancing the transparency of the policy process, increasing participation among particular groups, building better opportunities for deliberation and so on), their consequences are far from predictable. Any given initiative may, at one and the same time, both reinforce existing institutions and generate processes of change.

A third debate concerns the definition and meaning of e-democracy. Just as democracy itself is an essentially contested concept, so e-democracy is also subject to a myriad of definitions and competing conceptualisations. For some, e-democracy is narrowly defined as electronic voting and other technologically mediated methods of making conventional democratic devices work more efficiently (Kersting and Baldersheim 2004; Moynihan 2004; Oravec 2005). Others broaden the concept to include technologically mediated deliberation and participation. Grönlund, for example, reviews a wide range of potential applications but concludes that it is Barber's 'strong democracy' model that is most closely associated with e-democracy (Grönlund 2003). This theme is echoed by Kakabadse *et al*, when they define e-democracy as 'the capacity of the new communications environment to enhance the degree and quality of public participation in government' (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Kouzmin 2003). For many, therefore, e-democracy is associated with the normative project of democratic utopians and the desire to see the technologies facilitate greater deliberative and direct democracy.

Precisely what is meant by e-democracy, however, remains contentious, particularly when seeking to distinguish it conceptually from other applications of new technologies in the field of politics and public administration. Chadwick (2006), for example, distinguishes e-democracy from 'e-mobilization' (the use of technologies by citizens to organise politically), 'e-campaigning' (the use of technologies by political parties) and 'e-government' (technology facilitated public administration). For him, e-democracy is primarily concerned with political participation and community engagement, including the opportunity to 'enhance the public sphere'. This distinction is useful because it differentiates attempts to engage citizens in democracy from other political and administrative activities that may or may not be considered component parts of democracy. However, it is also problematic in so far as it arguably represents a false distinction: citizens rarely distinguish political or democratic engagement from more routine communication with public bodies. Moreover, it seems likely that citizens will potentially access the same website to pay their taxes, register a complaint and take part in a deliberative forum. Similarly, public servants use the same technologies to communicate with individual citizens, consult service users, and, potentially, develop richer forms of engagement. The boundaries between managerial, political and democratic uses of the same technologies are inevitably blurred. Furthermore, the ongoing development of different applications at one and the same time may further obfuscate this distinction rather than clarify it. While helpful in identifying the different institutional basis and uses of particular applications, therefore, this distinction does not perhaps represent the real understanding of e-democracy among either citizens or public servants. Indeed, it is possible to argue that highly developed e-government initiatives may militate against more democratic uses of the same technologies by reinforcing repertoires of use for the technologies which emphasise consumerist over citizen-centred understandings of relationships with public bodies and individualistic over collective forms of identity.

It is not the intention to add to existing definitions here but, given the inconsistency of competing definitions, it is useful to clarify the way in which the term 'e-democracy' is being used in this article. The main focus of this article is upon those ICT based initiatives that governments themselves are sponsoring as part of a process for

improving the transparency and responsiveness of government, enhancing the participation of citizens in the policy process, or developing new opportunities for opinion formation and exchange among and between citizens. The focus, therefore, is explicitly top-down: attention is on what governments are doing to reinforce, reinvigorate or reinvent the institutions of democracy, rather than what citizens themselves are doing. Such a focus does not deny the importance of citizen generated democratic initiatives; it simply concentrates attention on government actors and initiatives, and the role that they play in shaping political opportunity structures in the online world

In reviewing these three core debates it is clear that there are a number of different approaches taken towards the study of e-democracy. The problem with all of these approaches, however, is that they adopt normative views towards democracy (in so far as they ask what type of democracy do we want to achieve through the use of ICTs?) and are broadly deterministic in their analysis of the technologies (in so far as they ascribe particular impacts to ICTs in relation to democracy). The democratic X-ray approach eschews the normative and deterministic values that are inherent to all of the debates outlined above, in favour of a more empirical understanding of how democracy is developing. Democratic X-ray seeks to observe how e-democracy is being implemented and how this relates to existing democratic institutions (Taylor 1998).<sup>i</sup>

### **e-Democracy as X-ray**

The purpose of democratic X-ray is not to examine the effects that technologies are having upon democracy but, rather, to use them to reveal the purposes and actions of actors. The argument here is that by examining the purposes for which e-democracy is being implemented in different contexts it is possible to gain a rich insight into the democratic problems that actors perceive and the normative visions that they have for democracy in the future. Just as medical X-ray imaging not only diagnoses skeletal problems but also detects diseases in many soft tissues within the body, so democratic X-ray can get beneath the surface of popular discourses around democracy to provide a more sophisticated analysis of the intentions of actors in the democratic world. Consequently, it offers a very different approach to understanding e-democracy: one which focuses upon how various actors are seeking to shape democracy more generally, rather than what e-democracy is or is not achieving.

The notion of democratic X-ray builds upon Michael Saward's concept of democratic enactment (Saward 2003). Saward argues that there is little value in democratic theorists continuing to debate which models of democracy are best or, indeed, in defining which values or principles should receive higher priority in any democratic model. These arguments have reached a stalemate. Instead, he argues, attention should now be focused on the way in which different democratic devices (elections, referendums, deliberative exercises and so on) are sequenced to protect or realise particular democratic principles and to arrive at procedurally desirable democratic outcomes. His argument, therefore, is that democracies need to be continuously reflexive in the procedures that they implement in the constant search to balance competing principles. Consequently, effective democracy will include a mix of aggregative, negotiative and deliberative mechanisms at any one point (Schmitter, Trechsel, and *a*/2004). Moreover, what constitutes a procedurally effective democracy (and at this point Saward distinguishes between pure and perfect proceduralism) will vary between political communities as well as over time and across issues. Different sequences of democratic devices will lead to different

outcomes which can be deemed more or less democratic, according to the procedural and institutional norms of a political community.

Saward's 'reflexive proceduralism' is relevant to a concept of democratic x-ray because, as the discussion above demonstrated, the tools of e-democracy can be used to support different democratic visions and models and can have very different effects. In particular, his approach focuses upon how devices and the way in which they are sequenced, can support and bring to life different democratic principles:

Democratic principles come alive (are 'lived') through the medium of formal decisional mechanisms or devices which are designated to activate them *and* which come to be justified in terms of them. Their perceived utility as principles will largely rest on the performance of those devices. This is the essence of the reflexive relationship between principle and action. (Saward, 2003, p166).

The devices selected by those seeking to build or change democracy, and the way in which they are sequenced, lies at the heart of such enactment. The key question that emerges in the context of Saward's proceduralist arguments, therefore, is how are e-democracy devices being used and sequenced in the search for certain procedural outcomes and, indeed, within broader democratic procedures in different polities? It is this question that the empirical evidence below begins to address.

In order to provide a comparative base for democratic X-ray, it is useful to think of the procedural potential of e-democracy along two dimensions. First, there is the extent to which devices are seeking to affect the institutions of representation or citizenship in relation to democracy. This distinction captures, in a simplified way, the main normative hopes for e-democracy. **Representation** refers to those e-democracy tools that are directed towards the institutions of representative government and its procedures. Devices may support or enhance the mechanisms of representation (for example, e-voting) or improve the functioning of representatives (intranet websites). They may also serve to enhance the transparency and accountability of elected representatives or public administrations (through Blogging, webcasting of meetings, online newspapers, publishing minutes and records on the web and so on). **Citizenship**, in contrast, refers to initiatives that are more concerned with changing relationships with the public and enhancing notions of citizenship, deliberation and so on. In this context, e-democracy devices may also be used to support more participatory forms of citizenship, whether through consultation devices (e-panels, e-consultation and so on) through to deliberative mechanisms (such as online forums) or 'bottom-up' initiatives that seek to support the development of citizen action (from e-petitioning devices through to supporting community organisation online).

These two points are not necessarily in competition with one another. Indeed, the institutions of representative government are wholly dependent upon concepts of citizenship. Moreover, the different points do not capture homogenous concepts. At its most simple, the distinction between Schumpeter's 'realist' view that leaders and representatives should be left to govern between elections (Schumpeter 1943) and theories concerned with more participatory, communitarian or 'strong' forms of democracy provide a useful contrast (Barber 1984; Etzioni 1995; Tam 1998). More recently, concerns with the 'deliberative turn' in democratic theory (Dowding, Goodin, and Pateman 2004) have provided other ways of conceptualising political engagement that emphasise political learning through dialogue. However, it is the relationships between these two extremes and the emphasis that particular devices are giving to different actors that is important. The tools of e-democracy may be seeking either to support existing relationships between citizens and the institutions

of representative democracy, or indeed, to change fundamentally, this relationship. However, the ways in which these devices are sequenced is as important as the original choice to implement them. The e-petitioner suite of tools developed by Napier University, and being implemented in a number of local authorities as well as the Scottish Parliament, the German Bundestag and elsewhere, is deliberately sequenced according to a particular understanding of how democracy and citizenship should relate to one another (Macintosh and Whyte 2006).

Second, the distinction between transmission and interaction is important. This distinction captures a debate within the discussion of ICTs more broadly that is concerned with the changing forms of communication that the technologies facilitate. One of the key observations about the internet and related ICTs is that they provide much greater opportunities to collect, store and transmit information, almost instantly and at virtually no cost (Fountain 2001; van de Donk and Tops 1995). **Transmission** refers to communication which is largely unidirectional in its emphasis. At their most simple, the internet and other ICTs provide the opportunity for public bodies to transmit information more effectively to citizens, thereby enhancing transparency (for example, through extensive online publishing of reports, committee minutes and so on). Politicians may also use the technologies to communicate their ideas and beliefs to citizens through personal websites, blogs and so on. Equally, citizens can use the new technologies to transmit their concerns and opinions to elected officials or public organisations (for example, through mass emailing). The key point in transmission, however, is that information flow is generally unidirectional, with an absence of a sustained dialogue between the sender and the recipient. In this respect, online referendums and e-voting systems are transmission devices, in which citizens express their preferences to political institutions. **Interaction**, by contrast, implies a more reflexive and iterative approach to communication, in which technologies facilitate two or more actors engaged in a dialogue. Online forums clearly sit at this end of the scale but other activities, such as participatory budgeting or those that facilitate community development are also significant here.

These distinctions are inevitably rudimentary but they do capture the main distinctions that need to be understood in democratic sequencing: the extent to which devices are seeking to support representation or enhance citizenship in the polity; and the degree to which they are facilitating transmission of information or interaction with democratic procedures. This framework is being used here more as a heuristic than as an absolute categorisation. Figure 1 illustrates a range of e-democracy initiatives and how they might be sited in relation to these dimensions. Again, this figure is offered as a heuristic rather than an absolute statement of where individual devices should be sited. The way in which individual devices are sequenced in democratic procedures will affect their utility in this framework. Blogs, for example, can be a unidirectional form of information communication or provide the basis for enhanced deliberation on particular issues. They may also be used primarily to support the representative process, with elected representatives using them as democratic listening posts (Coleman 2004), or as vehicles for greater citizenship, where citizens deliberate among themselves within the public sphere.

Figure 1 about here

This framework provides a way of understanding not only how different initiatives might relate to one another but also their potential impact upon democracy. Importantly, it does not make assumptions about what is the best form of e-democracy or what is most needed in a particular circumstance: it simply reflects the

effects of each activity. Consequently, it provides a mechanism with which to understand how specific initiatives may change or reinforce particular aspects of contemporary democracy. Using this framework it is possible to compare not only individual initiatives but also the range of initiatives that comprise the suite of e-democracy activities in a country. It is to an empirical application of this framework that the article now turns.

## Researching e-democracy initiatives

Evidence is already emerging that e-democracy is developing in different ways in different places. Two recent surveys of the democratic potential of local government websites in the USA (Scott 2006) and the UK (Pratchett, Karakaya-Polat, and Wingfield 2006) demonstrate that, even at the local level within individual countries, there is considerable variation. To explore local variation further, the research reported here analysed e-democracy developments in five European countries.<sup>ii</sup> This research, conducted in the spring of 2006, offers a snapshot of local e-democracy developments in five European countries. Alongside Coleman and Kaposi's study of e-participation initiatives in new democracies (Coleman and Kaposi 2006), this research provides the first comparative analysis of e-democracy across countries. Moreover, it is the first such study to focus upon Europe.

Five countries were selected as providing a broad cross-section of the e-democracy experience. These five countries cover a number of dimensions that are normally taken into account when comparing local democracy in Europe including northern and southern European countries, and both old and recently acceded EU countries (John 2001). In addition, emphasis was given to finding countries with contrasting experiences of democratic development and those that have already developed a reputation for e-government or e-democracy. Two countries that are recent additions to the EU (Estonia and Hungary) were analysed alongside two established EU countries (Spain and the UK), and one which, although outside of the EU, is nonetheless heavily implicated in its political and economic projects (Switzerland). **Estonia** was selected as a recent accession country because, although small, it has a material commitment to and reputation for innovative e-government and e-democracy. It is also representative of a wider Nordic commitment to exploiting new technologies in all spheres of socio-political and economic life. **Hungary** was selected as a second representative of a recent EU accession country which, unlike Estonia, spans a significant territory. **Spain** was chosen because it is a major southern EU country with a substantial commitment to (and experience of) innovation in local democracy, especially in some of the autonomous regions, while the **United Kingdom**, equally, represents a major northern EU country (in economic and population terms) with a substantial commitment to e-government and e-democracy. Indeed, the UK has probably invested more in e-democracy than any other European country, spearheaded by its £4.5 million Local e-Democracy National Project. Finally, **Switzerland** represents one of the leading European countries on e-democracy (especially e-voting) but outside of the EU.

The focus was especially, but not exclusively, on developments at the local level, as it is at sub-central government level that most e-democracy developments have occurred to date. The collection of data in these countries took place between April and June 2006, although some of the initiatives analysed had been in existence, or had occurred, some time before these dates. Data was collected through country analysts with specialised knowledge of e-democracy and e-participation initiatives in their respective countries. Analysts were asked to identify the full range of initiatives in their country, including those that were 'typical' and those that were 'exceptional'.

For each initiative the analyst approached an expert who had been involved in its development (such as the project manager), who was interviewed using a structured pro-forma. The information collected ranged from the basis of the initiative and the way it was managed, through to the lessons and evaluation that was undertaken in relation to it. In total, 49 cases were analysed in the five countries, including both the most prominent examples of e-democracy in each country and a combination of 'typical' and 'unusual' examples of e-democracy initiatives. The purpose was not to create a comprehensive account of every initiative taking place in each country as this exercise would have been both resource intensive and repetitive, with many examples of the same e-democracy application in multiple localities. Instead, the purpose was to develop an overview of the types of initiative that are prominent in the public or political consciousness in each country: in effect, a profile for each country.

### **An X-ray of five democracies**

Figure 2 uses the framework outlined above to summarise the different initiatives that are being developed in each of the countries. An immediate conclusion that can be drawn from this figure is that, while each country has a range of e-democracy initiatives, there is no consistent pattern that emerges across the board. Each country has its own pattern of using e-democracy: there are different processes of democratic enactment taking place. This section will give a brief outline of the broad differences between the countries before focusing especially upon the issues of intentionality and sequencing in the process of enactment.

Figure 2 about here

Despite the hopes and hyperbole surrounding much of the e-democracy literature, the range of applications that governments are working with is, in reality, relatively modest. The 49 cases analysed independently in the five countries show some consistency in the way in which governments are seeking to use e-democracy at the local level, although there is also some considerable variation. Appendix 1 lists the 49 cases. For example, in every country except Switzerland there are instances of web forums and other deliberative tools, backing up Grönlund's (2003) argument that e-democracy is most closely associated with the deliberative devices of 'strong democracy'. Similarly, a number of the cases include examples of e-voting, reflecting various governments' ongoing interest in addressing voter apathy and increasing electoral efficiency through these technologies; even in the face of sustained objections from significant proportions of citizens and organised interests (Dutton, Gennaro, and Hargrave 2005). However, as the analysis below will show, despite some superficial similarities in technological application across countries, the way in which they are being used and sequenced varies considerably.

**Estonia** provides an interesting starting point for this analysis because, despite its high profile reputation in developing e-government applications, the range of e-democracy tools that it uses is surprisingly limited. Probably the best known e-democracy application in Estonia is the e-voting that took place in the October 2005 local elections across the country (EST2). Although less than two per cent of voters actually used the new e-voting channels, the implementation of 'the first country-wide e-elections ever held in the world' (Breur and Trechsel 2006) put the country in the vanguard of e-democracy applications. The other major development in this area has been the national direct democracy portal TOM (translated as 'Today I Decide'); a form of online petitioning which is structured around citizen deliberation and

negotiation in advance of formal responses from representatives (EST1). Implemented by the Estonian Prime Minister, Mart Laar, in 2001, this portal allows citizens to propose, discuss and refine issues for government attention, before submitting them for a formal response by the relevant agency which has to be made within an agreed timescale. The whole process operates online and over a remarkably short period of time: users have 14 days to respond to an idea before it is refined by the proposer and submitted, while state agencies have one month to publish their response on the system. By June 2005 some 1645 ideas had been debated and submitted for consideration by over 6000 registered users, highlighting the potential for such systems to engage significant numbers of citizens in the development of policy.

The interesting point about these two high profile projects is that they were both initiated by central government and are focused specifically upon enhancing the representative process. Although the e-voting system was implemented for local elections, it was premised on the Estonian Government's desire to move to e-voting for all elections in the near future and draws upon the national ID card system to make it work. TOM, in effect, provides an opportunity for citizens to engage in setting the agenda for decision-makers., although, notably, it does not actually cede power to those same citizens. Beyond these two significant initiatives, however, it is notable that there are very few other e-democracy developments in a country that is pushing the boundaries of e-government. The Estonian analyst reported that 'there are no well known local government e-democracy initiatives'. Data provided by the e-Governance Academy in Estonia based upon a 2006 survey of local government websites showed that only 10 of Estonia's 33 main towns had web-forums available for citizen use and concluded that the majority of local authorities do not provide opportunities for citizen feedback electronically. Overall, therefore, while Estonia is developing some major e-democracy initiatives, these are primarily focused upon making representative government work more effectively at the national level. Although figure 2 shows some activity in the citizenship/interaction quarter of the table, this activity is among a selected group of municipal governments and there is little evidence to suggest it is galvanising significant public engagement. Local e-democracy is very much the poor relation, in this respect, although such findings may be explained by the small geographic and population size of the country. The major initiatives in Estonia are focused upon enhancing the performance of representative governance, especially at the national level, by both improving its legitimacy (e-voting) and augmenting policy development and decision-making processes (TOM).

**Hungary** provides a useful contrast to the Estonian case. Like Estonia, Hungary is a relatively new democracy which acceded to the European Union in 2004. However, its democratic development, and its use of electronic tools to support government and democracy, has been very different. While it now has ambitious plans to develop e-government, Hungary has accorded much lower priority to it in the past and, as the country analyst observed, e-democracy initiatives have emerged largely as a 'side-effect or add-on' to the wider and largely disjointed e-government initiatives that different organisations have developed at the national and local level. However, despite, or perhaps because of, this fragmented and unplanned development process, Hungary offers a range of different e-democracy applications to its citizens.

The Hungarian experience reflects the way in which e-democracy devices are being used to respond to perceived problems in the polity. Revisions to the country's freedom of information laws in 2002 and 2005 have encouraged a significant growth in the amount of online publishing that local authorities do in relation to council decisions, procurement contracts and so on. Indeed, transparency of local government appears to be a major feature of many of the cases, from the 'online

mayor' initiative in a district of Budapest (H2), through to a variety of question and answer mechanisms that different municipalities have developed to encourage individual citizens to interact with public servants (H1, H3, H4, H12, H14). It is notable, however, that many of these communication initiatives are run from press and public relations departments, which emphasises the transparency and legitimacy credentials of the activities but may e calls in to question their democratic ambitions. However, there is also a strong emphasis in many areas upon developing citizenship and engagement through online projects that support education, online take-up and deliberation. Pilisvörösvár's website for the blind (H13) provides e-engagement opportunities for a group normally excluded from e-democracy activities, while a number of projects aimed at providing universal access to the internet seek to address potential digital divide problems elsewhere (H8, H11).

What sets Hungarian local government apart from the other countries in this study, however, is the significance of online forums to local polities in many areas. Many municipalities have promoted such forums (H5, H7, H9, H10, H14), although some have been more popular than others. Arguably the most successful, however, has been the forum in the southern town of Komló (H5), which has had 'thousands of contributions on hundreds of topics' (interview with website content manager) since its launch in 2003. An interesting aspect of this forum is its origins. The forum was added to the website for technical reasons, as the private company that developed the new website for the town felt it was good practice to include one in any modern website: no political decision was ever made to highlight or develop the forum. Quite spontaneously, citizens discovered and started to use the forum, forcing local politicians to read and respond to comments and to engage with citizens' concerns. While politicians remain sceptical about this form of engagement, it has clearly filled a gap in the polity that citizens wanted, even if it has emerged by accident. However, it is also notable that forums elsewhere in the country have had more variable success.

In concluding on the Hungarian case, therefore, it is worth noting the different directions in which e-democracy is developing. Although the initiatives seem to be much more *ad hoc* than observed in the Estonian case, they also appear to be focused more upon the perceived shortcomings of democracy in the country: the first being initiatives around enhancing political and organisational transparency and the second being concerned with creating a stronger sense of citizenship in localities. There is a dual emphasis, therefore, upon communication between representatives and citizens on the one hand, and the development of genuinely interactive dialogues between the same groups, on the other.

The **Spanish** case provides a contrast to Hungary not only because of its geographic, demographic and political differences but, also, because of the way in which actors in Spanish governments enact e-democracy. Although Spanish municipalities have experimented with some e-voting in local elections and the referendum on the European Constitution (in the municipalities of Pol, Lugo, Zamora and El Hoyo de Pinares) this has been driven and funded primarily by national government priorities. Moreover, these few experiments have resulted in very small turnouts and, especially in relation to the European Constitution referendum, attracted public and political criticism for its high cost but low impact. A clear conclusion that emerges in relation to national government priorities, therefore, is the desire to focus upon communication facilities to bolster representation, rather than any interest in enhancing other aspects of democracy. Ironically, it is this emphasis which is creating an antipathy among Spanish politicians towards e-democracy or, worse still, a dislike and distrust towards its impacts which is very much in keeping with the dystopian perspectives outlined earlier.

At the local level, the emphasis is much more upon the development of projects that consult or engage citizens. Two developments are worth highlighting. First, the Madrid Participa project (ESP 3), which took place in the central district of Madrid in 2004, provided the first major multi-channel public consultation in Spain. Sponsored by a range of private sector companies that were interested in 'proving' their e-tools, the 136,000 citizens of Centro district were given the opportunity to read and deliberate on three questions concerning the facilities and priorities in their area, before voting through a range of channels including internet, telephone and SMS text message. Although participation was extremely low with only 882 votes being cast (0.65 per cent of registered voters), feedback from those who took part was generally positive. Interestingly, the consultation was non-binding, although the Mayor did agree to take the opinions from the initiative into account in developing future plans. Despite the limited participation rates, the technological platform is now being rolled out in other parts of Madrid.

Second, as the bottom right corner of the Spanish section of Figure 2 shows, two specific platforms dominate e-democracy developments in Spanish local government. In Catalonia, 19 municipalities use the e-consensus platform (ESP 9); a 'virtual space at the local level' that was developed by a collaboration of a civil association (the Jaume Bofill Foundation), a private foundation (the Catalan Institute of Technology) and a consortium of municipalities. The e-consensus package is interesting because it provides a specific sequencing of deliberation and consultation through electronic means. Elsewhere in Spain, approximately 120 municipalities use Ciudadanos2010.net (ESP 5, ESP 7, ESP8) which, like e-consensus, provides a range of tools for online deliberation and consultation: primarily, locally moderated discussion forums. Developed as a commercial package by Europa Press, with funding from the EU, the package grew out of an earlier application (Ciudadanos2005.net) and is linked to a range of other ICT initiatives that support political campaigning and communication. However, its use and acceptance has varied in different localities. In some areas, local politicians and citizens have made extensive use of it to support a more deliberative and engaged polity in which citizens can both propose and debate policy ideas. In others, politicians have been slow to take it up and reluctant to use it as part of the decision-making process.

Three conclusions emerge from this brief review of Spanish e-democracy. First, there are significant differences between national and local actors in terms of how they are trying to use e-democracy. While national actors are focused almost exclusively upon e-voting as a means of reinvigorating representative democracy, local actors appear to be much more willing to exploit the interactive potential of the technologies, seeking to enhance notions of citizenship through deliberative devices such as online forums. Second, however, despite the more deliberative nature of local e-democracy, it is notable that in none of the three initiatives outlined above have elected representatives ceded power to citizens in any significant way. Even in the most engaging forum, local politicians still reserve the right to debate the issues in the traditional council chamber and to arrive at their own decisions. Third, the importance of commercial interests in driving forward e-democracy solutions is notable. All of the main initiatives are underpinned by significant private sector and independent foundation finances. Nevertheless, the way in which generic tools are being used in different municipalities varies considerably, demonstrating the point that application is not necessarily driven exclusively by the technologies. Actors are capable of enacting the technologies in ways which seek to address the problems that they are concerned with.

**Switzerland** is unique in Figure 2 because of the way in which its initiatives are skewed towards the communication and representation quadrant in the top-left of the table. The publication of documents online among many cantons and communes is common among municipal governments, especially as a means of enhancing transparency (CH 2). However, the key feature of e-democracy in Switzerland centres around e-voting and related activities (CH4, CH 5, CH 6, CH 7). Indeed, experiments with e-voting in Geneva and Zurich dominate the e-democracy map of Switzerland. Given its federated nature, and the fierce independence of the cantons, it is remarkable that much of the e-voting agenda is being driven by the Federal government: although e-voting has been tested in several cantons and communes its origins lie at the federal level and many of the initiatives receive significant financial support from this level. Even where e-democracy initiatives extend beyond the physical act of voting the emphasis is still around electoral processes. Hence, the smartvote projects (CH 1 and CH 5) are aimed at providing citizens with more information about candidates and their behaviour, rather than developing other forms of citizen engagement.

One explanation for the distinctiveness of the Swiss case lies in its existing political culture and the emphasis that is placed upon direct democracy. As the Swiss country analyst observed, there are already high levels of deliberation within cantons as a result of regular referendums and, consequently, there is little political pressure to create more opportunities for further political engagement or participation. Instead, political effort is focused around making one democratic procedure work more effectively; namely, voting procedures, either in elections or referendums. As a consequence, the Swiss case is an important illustration of how policy actors will choose those e-tools that address the concerns that they have, rather than adopting e-democracy tools simply because they are there.

The **United Kingdom** provides the fifth and final country in this study and represents arguably the most diverse range of e-democracy initiatives. Examples of UK e-democracy range from unidirectional devices aimed at enhancing the transparency of local government, such as webcasting of council meetings (UK 1) and councillor blogging (UK 7, UK 9), devices aimed at enhancing accountability (UK 3), through to a range of devices which provide new ways to consult citizens (UK 2) or to engage them in more deliberative processes (UK 5, UK 6, UK 8). There are also a number of initiatives that support 'grass-roots' community development and engagement, such as Essexinfo.net, which provides a toolkit and hosting for over 200 community websites in the county, and the BBC Action Network, which provides an online resource for community based action in various locations across the UK.

The key driver for e-democracy in the UK has been a £4.5 million two year 'Local e-Democracy National Project' sponsored by the national government (through the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister – responsibilities for this policy area now rest with Communities and Local Government), which has developed a wide range of e-democracy tools for use by English local authorities. Much (although by all means not all) of the e-democracy that is now in place or is developing in the UK has its roots in this project (see [www.icele.org](http://www.icele.org)). It provides an important context because it has both shaped the types of e-democracy tools that are being taken up by local authorities in the UK and provided a strong incentive for the UK local government to be in the vanguard of e-democracy more generally. The National Project did not sponsor one vision of e-democracy but allowed a number of very different initiatives to develop which could be adapted to local needs. As a consequence, the picture of the UK is much more mixed than that found in other countries, with a very broad range of initiatives under way. One potential problem of this top-down, comprehensive approach to e-democracy, is that it might crowd out more grass-roots

initiatives. However, it should be noted that to date this has not been the case, with non-state organisations such as MySociety developing some important e-democracy tools, in some instances with support from government projects.

Despite the wide range of initiatives that the National Project sponsored, there are some trends that have emerged in the take-up of e-democracy in the UK. First, UK local authorities place a strong emphasis upon e-democracy devices that communicate information to citizens: from high levels of information on websites (Pratchett, Karakaya-Polat, and Wingfield 2006) through to webcasting of council meetings, UK councils are keen to develop higher levels of transparency. It is for this reason that so many of the devices analysed in this research appear in the top (communicate) half of the table. Second, there is a significant focus on consultative techniques: that is, devices that enable public bodies to consult the public on a range of issues. Understanding public preferences seems to be a significant feature of e-democracy in the UK, either by offering general consultations through such techniques as micro-democracy (where individuals sign-up to receive emails or text messages on consultations that might affect them), or by targeting selected groups for consultation. Third, and linked to this emphasis upon consultation, e-democracy appears to be conceptualised primarily as the engagement of individuals in the policy process rather than the involvement of groups. In this respect, e-democracy appears to be following a wider trend in UK local government which is seeking to circumvent or replace the conventional institutions of local democracy (such as local pressure groups) with alternative, more individualised forms of political engagement.

It should be noted that the UK case does not include any examples of e-voting, despite the fact that significant pilot projects were undertaken in 2002 and 2003. This omission is primarily a feature of the time frame of the research, reflecting the reality that e-voting came to a halt after the 2003 pilots as other forms of voting modernisation (primarily postal voting) were experimented with. However, the May 2007 local elections will have another round of e-voting pilots. Alongside wider e-consultation and e-participation initiatives, therefore, e-voting can be expected to become a long term feature of the e-democracy landscape in the UK.

## **Conclusions**

Using e-democracy to understand how democracy is developing provides some unique insights into the different issues affecting the countries of Europe. The five countries studied in this analysis show some significant differences in the way in which they are developing and using tools of e-participation and e-democracy. Most notably, there is no one direction in which democratic change is taking place. Putative deliberative democracy is being supported through online forums and so on in many countries but it is often other initiatives that are having more take-up and a more significant impact. This outcome is partly because of the path-dependent nature of democratic institutions and the difficulty in creating change. However, it also highlights the problems of deliberative concepts when applied to reality.

One effect of the technologies, however, is to highlight and, arguably, to exacerbate tensions between different democratic values and principles. In particular, there is a clear tension emerging between concepts of representation (and attempts to use new technologies to bolster it) and varying ideas of more participatory democracy: a problem that has always existed in democratic theory but which is now being played out in real democracies. The implementation of new technologies highlights these tensions and brings them to the fore. In effect, they provide a tool for exposing the underlying tensions in existing democratic procedures and a means for

understanding the values and ambitions of those who are seeking to supplement or change those procedures.

A similar tension exists between individualistic and collective forms of engagement: a tension which, again, is exposed by different e-democracy initiatives. Many initiatives appear to seek a circumvention of traditional institutions of interest mediation in favour of going 'direct to the citizens'. At the same time, however, there are also attempts to enhance the organisations of civil society and collective action. Moreover, the technologies also have the potential to offer new modes of interest mediation and collective action. With many of the projects studied in this project there is a significant issue around ensuring that what is developed in a top-down form both supports and works with bottom-up developments.

**Figure 1: Examples of e-democracy initiatives**

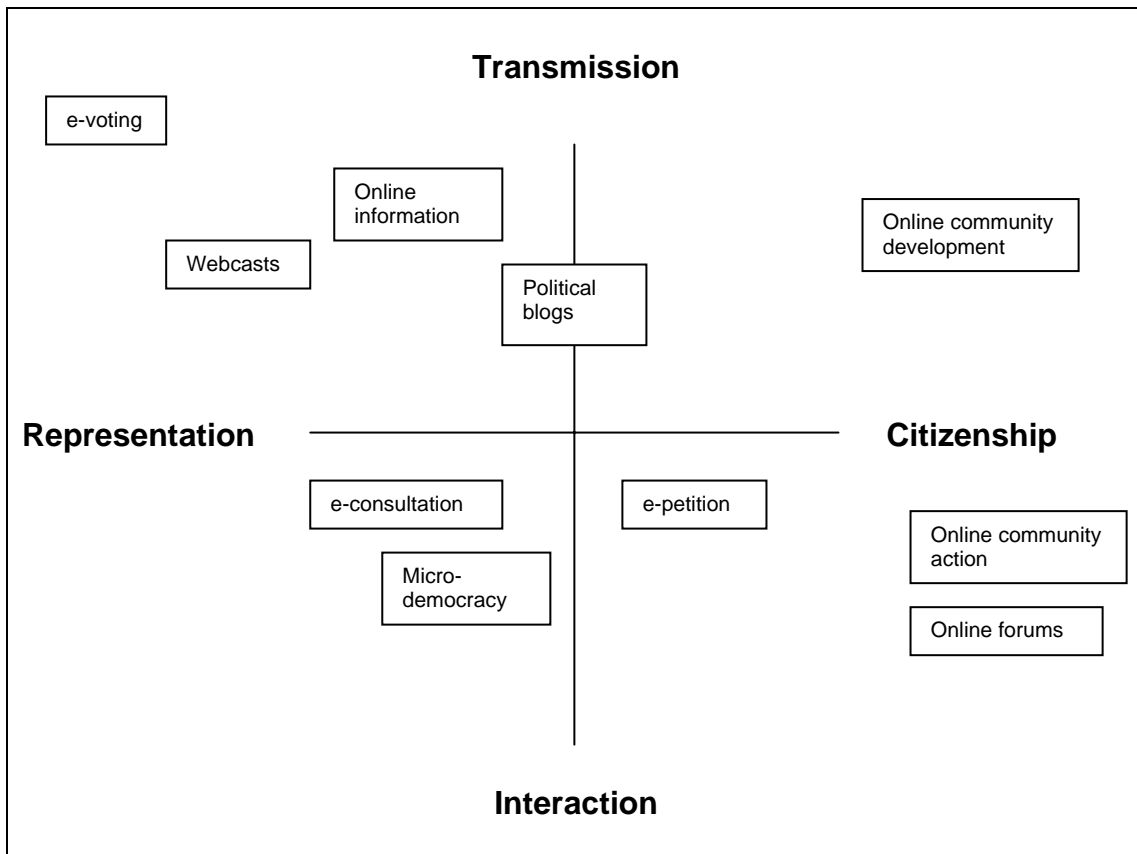
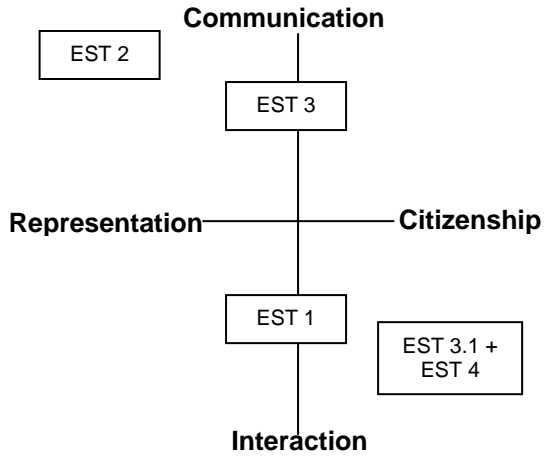
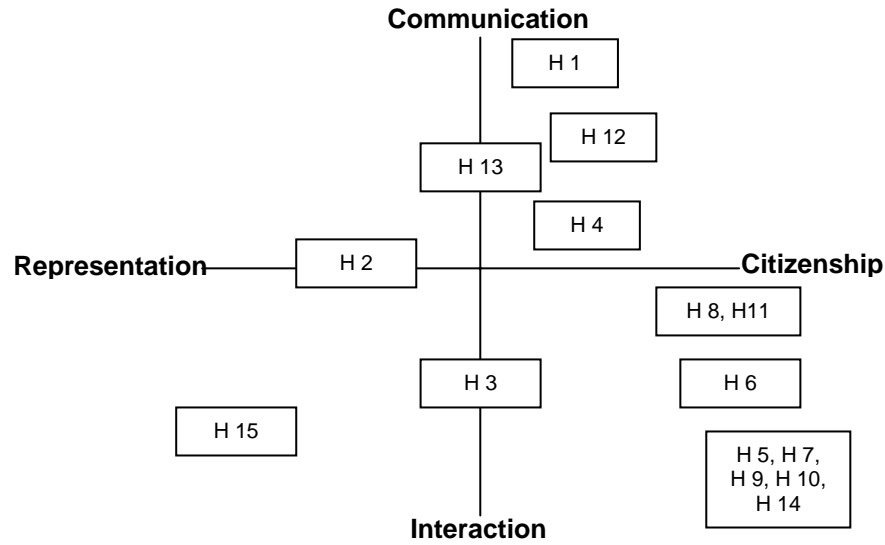


Figure 2: Countries compared

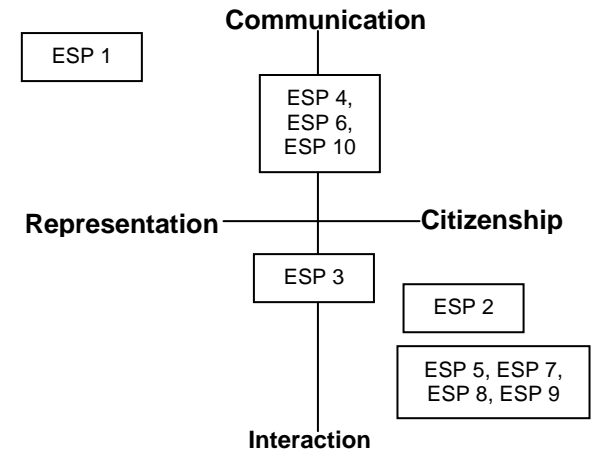
**Estonia**



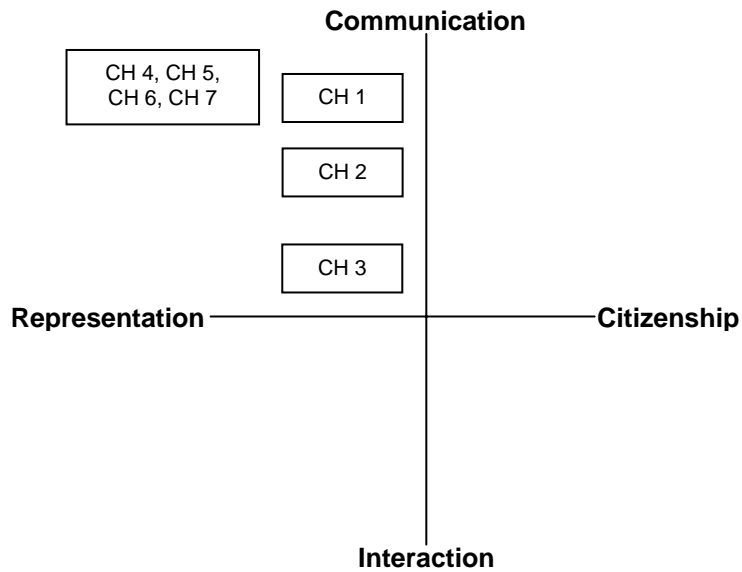
**Hungary**



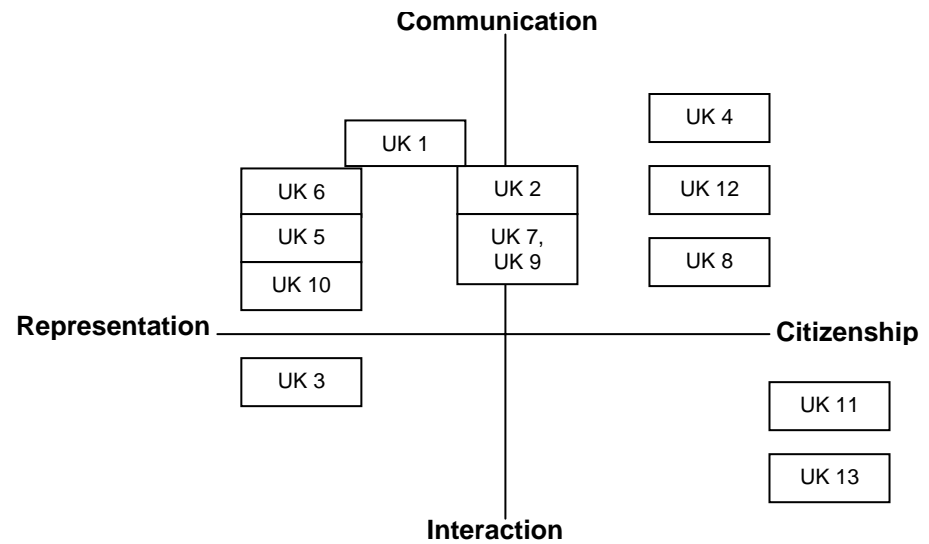
**Spain**



**Switzerland**



**United Kingdom**



## Appendix 1 - e-Democracy cases

### Title of initiative

#### Estonia

EST 1	Today I Decide
EST 2	Internet voting
EST 3	E-dem home page
EST 4	Web forum

#### Hungary

H 1	Green number
H 2	The online mayor
H 3	Televised forum
H 4	Guest book
H 5	Forum
H 6	Strategy
H7	Forum
H8	Telehut
H9	Forum
H 10	Forum
H 11	Free hot spot
H 12	Send an SMS to the Mayor
H 13	Website for the blind
H 14	e-Point
H15	Councillor intranet

#### Spain

ESP 1	e-Vote
ESP 2	Digital village
ESP 3	Madrid participa
ESP 4	Participative budget
ESP 5	Ciudadanos2010.net
ESP 6	Participative budget
ESP 7	Ciudadanos2010.net
ESP 8	Ciudadanos2010.net
ESP 9	Consensus
ESP 10	Participative budget

#### Switzerland

CH 1	Smartvote
CH 2	Financial info
CH 3	e-Consultation
CH 4	Bulach e-vote
CH 5	Anieres e-vote
CH 6	Neuchatel e-vote
CH 7	Zurich e-vote

#### United Kingdom

UK 1	Webcasting
UK 2	Micro-democracy
UK 3	HearFromYourMP.com
UK 4	Online newspaper

UK 5	e-consultation & e-panel
UK 6	Your Norfolk Your Say
UK 7	Cllr Blog
UK 8	e-Petitioner
UK 9	Cllr Blog
UK 10	Ask Bristol
UK 11	Essex info
UK 12	Youth Parliament
UK 13	BBC Action Network

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<sup>i</sup> I draw the X-ray metaphor from John Taylor, although his use of it is very different in so far as he focuses specifically on how information flows may create a paradigm shift in understanding public administration

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