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Introduction to "Empowerment and e-Participation in Civil Society: Local, National and International Implications" Workshop Proceedings¹

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Abstract. While there has been extensive investigation of government-initiated (top-down) forms of e-participation, the *Empowerment and e-Participation in Civil Society: Local, National and International Implications* workshop provided an opportunity to share knowledge on how civil society actors are using technologies for democratic bottom-up empowerment. The workshop was held in conjunction with two European research networks, DEMO-net and CINEFOGO. This publication includes selected proceedings from the workshop.

1 Workshop scope

DEMO-net² (the European e-Participation Network of Excellence) hosted a workshop to examine how the internet and ICTs are reshaping citizens' social movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) through new forms of media and participation. The workshop, titled *Empowerment and e-Participation in Civil Society: Local, National and International Implications*, was held at

¹ This introduction is an edited version of the workshop report which can be found here:

http://www.electronicgovernment.se/demo_net_WS_2008/

² <http://www.demo-net.org/>

Gythyttan Inn near Örebro University, Sweden on May 9th and 10th 2008 in conjunction with the Civil Society and New Forms of Governance in Europe (CINEFOGO)¹ conference *Normative Implications of New Forms of Participation for Democratic Policy Processes*.

At this forum, we shared both the theoretical and empirical research on e-participation in civil society actors such as media, communities, social movements and NGOs. Important topics the workshop addressed include:

1. How are civil society actors using the Internet for political communication? What democratic changes are this leading to?
2. Do e-participation developments affect civil society by providing new platforms for debate and engagement? How?
3. Will the Internet revitalize or erode offline associations and community life? How are online communities similar or different from offline ones?
4. Is the use of ICTs for internal organization of civil society actors enabling more internal participation?
5. Is the rise of new media (blogs, wikis, etc.) leading to a more participative form of media?

2 Selected proceedings

Of the more than 30 submissions to the workshop, five selections are included in this publication. Two of the selections answer the questions above by looking at particular civil society blogs, while the other three articles address the questions from national perspectives.

In the first chapter, “Are Political Weblogs Public Spheres or Partisan Spheres? A Virtual Ethnographic Study of Online Participations and Implications for Civic Participation in the Internet Age,” Ravi Vatrapu, Scott Robertson, Wimal Dissanayake and Aparajita Jeedigunta investigate an American blog called Eschaton. As many wonder if the internet will provide a new form of ‘public sphere,’ the authors use this case to describe in what ways political blogs may and may not constitute ‘public spheres’.

The second chapter, “Framing Issues, Fomenting Change, ‘Feministing’: A Contemporary Feminist Blog in the Landscape of Online Political Activism” by Jessica Mowles, uses a feminist methodology to relate a particular feminist blog, ‘Feministing,’ to wider research on blogging. She argues that while blogs have become centers of political discourse, they are not yet having substantial affects on policy.

Three of the articles look at civil society and e-participation in particular countries. Peter Mambrey presents the German developments within the civil

¹ <http://www.cinefogo.org/>

society and e-participation arena in the article “Civil Society and eParticipation: The German perspective” in the third chapter.

Three researchers, Anna Carola Freschi, Luca Raffini and Michela Balocchi, describe Italian grassroots online politics in the fourth chapter, “What kind of grassroots e-participation? The uneasy demand of a new politics in Italy: between continuity and innovation.” They look at historical developments beginning with early experiments, moving on to social movements (especially anti-globalization), then the rise of grassroots blogs (particularly the case of *beppegrillo.it*), and finally other activism like political positioning games and representative accountability.

The final chapter presents an empirical study of Bulgaria by Hannu Larsson, Vasilena Neykova and Wang Ruili. The authors investigate young, well-educated Bulgarians’ views on online versus offline political participation. Although they find that the youth are interested in e-participation, corruption and lack of trust in civil society, politics and government hinder participation in Bulgaria.

3 Conclusion

Civil society and e-participation are emerging phenomenon. The following chapters begin exploration of this phenomenon from two perspectives, 1) analyses of specific incarnations of the phenomenon (i.e. blogs), and 2) analyses of the phenomenon in specific countries. We hope these studies inspire further investigation of how information and communication technologies are changing civil society.