

# **Disruptive spaces and transformative praxis: Reclaiming community voices through electronic democracy**

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## **Abstract**

Internet-connected ICTs offer citizens and communities an opportunity for greater influence and more direct involvement in democratic processes through better access to information, lower cost publishing and by improving inter and intra group communication. This paper will use the provisional findings of research to identify and describe an emergent eDemocracy process for community-level engagement. It discusses the relative position and significance of the technical and social spheres of community informatics, with emphasis on process, awareness building, access and literacy. The paper describes a third sphere, that of transformative praxis, where current processes and power structures are disrupted, potentially allowing new opportunities, new processes and new solutions that are enabled by ICTs to emerge.

The role of actors as key agents of change, both within communities and from government is discussed. Such actors provide a link between the human and the technical, leading to a reclaiming of social power to implement new technical systems that support community goals and privilege community agendas over technocratic interventions. The research findings suggest that whilst such changes manifest in new or modified strategies, processes and systems within the technical sphere, they are the result of disruptive actions that take place amongst actors in the social sphere. A process of awareness building and advocacy leads to social action and the development of transformative praxis, which in turn creates the environment for technical actions to emerge.

## **Introduction**

There is evidence that ICTs, particularly the internet and wireless communication, have become significant transformative technologies, offering citizens the potential to reclaim their voice at a time when increasing decentralisation of decision making is mirrored by declining democratic participation (Norris 2002). There has been a technocratic shift resulting in decision making moving away from elected representatives towards ‘experts’. Decisions are made based on science and professional knowledge, not public opinion (Mälkiä, Anttiroiko et al. 2004). The reality of this for disadvantaged communities is highlighted by what the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (2006, p.9) describes as a culture of bureaucratic dysfunction, where policy development has “become highly academic and has lost touch with practical service delivery” and that there is “no

real respect for community sector knowledge.” The NZCCSS report suggests that communities are over-consulted and then ignored.

The internet is a demonstrably powerful tool for connecting people with information and with each other and, as Schuler (2000) observes, it provides tools for strong democracy, such as email, forums and online access to documents. Like all media, ICTs can be valuable if harnessed for communicating a message. They provide an interactive experience, where the views of many can be expressed and potentially disseminated widely. This sets ICTs apart from traditional print and electronic media and offers citizens the opportunity to become more involved in the political and democratic process.

This paper will explore the definitions of eDemocracy across a continuum from government-centric to citizen-centric. It then goes on to describe a model for the emergence eDemocracy that is derived from the findings of research into local community usage of ICTs in New Zealand.

## **Defining eDemocracy**

Riley (2003, p.55) observes that there are “as many interpretations of what constitutes e-democracy as there are interpretations of democracy.” eDemocracy is an emerging field and Coleman (2004) suggests that it is (and should remain) a contestable discourse. The use of the word ‘democracy’ itself is, he argues, fraught with problems, describing it as a “term that we throw around as if we all understand it and agree about it” but that ‘democracy’ cannot “be regarded as having a coherent and substantive meaning when it is so often appropriated by the self-serving rhetorics’ of corporate, imperial and other exclusive interests?” (Coleman 2004, p.1). Coleman is rightly wary of the current fetish for the prefixing of an ‘e’ in front of familiar words in order to render new electronic metaphors. He warns that “when we combine such pliable and hybrid buzzwords and get *eDemocracy*, can we expect this to be a term that illuminates more than it hides?” (p.1).

Many traditional – if such a word is appropriate for such a recent innovation – discussions of eDemocracy retain representative government processes at the centre, whilst acknowledging that the greatest potential for ICTs lies in their ability to engage citizens. Indeed, Coleman criticises what he calls the “simplistic connection between eDemocracy and direct, plebiscitary democracy” (Coleman 2004, p.2). This section will critique some of the key definitions of eDemocracy and draws on literature to present alternative approaches to eDemocracy that offer the potential for more citizen-

focused debate and for the creation of fora beyond the political centre. Caution is required, however, since traditional sources of exclusion are duplicated on the internet (Castells 2001) and this extends to the use of the internet for democratic purposes (Malina and Macintosh 2004).

Traditional approaches to eDemocracy are represented diagrammatically in Figure 1.

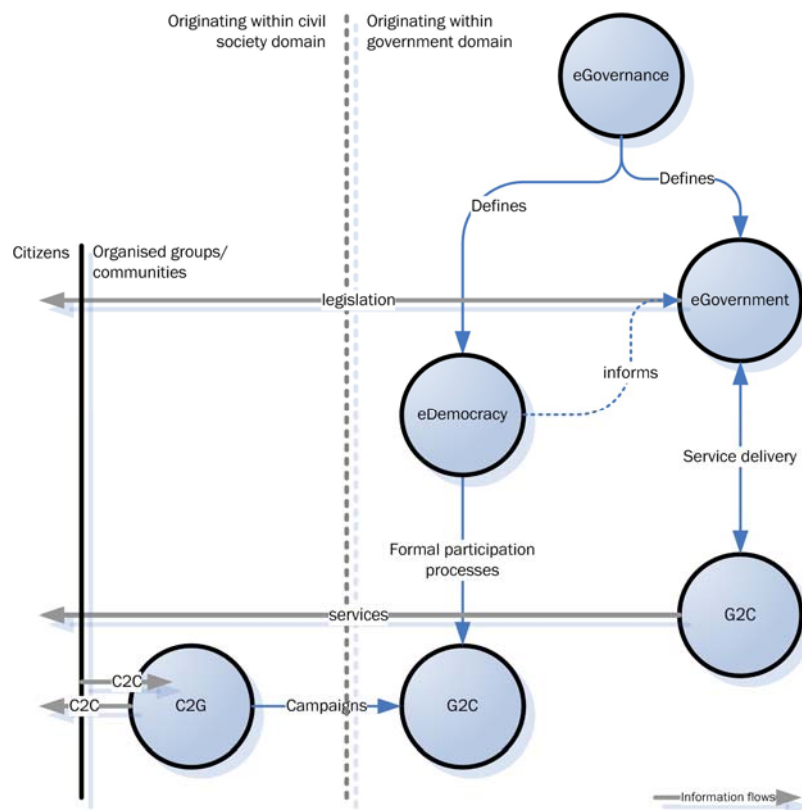


Figure 1: Situating of eDemocracy within a Government-centric context<sup>1</sup>.

Whilst the rhetoric of government values engaged citizens and governments feel the need to solicit “feedback in order to develop good policy and services at all levels” (Office of the e-Envoy 2001, p.1), citizen involvement should not be assumed. Ranerup (2000) observes that whilst online fora can be initiated by a range of actors, citizens are not necessarily consulted over the establishment and design, despite being key stakeholders. This highlights a gap between the technocracy of public administration and the desire of those citizens interested in democratisation and the revival of representative bodies (Chadwick 2003).

<sup>1</sup> C2C = Citizen to Citizen; C2G = Citizen to Government; G2C = Government to Citizen.

Just as reinventing poorly functioning traditional processes in an online environment will result in a poorly functioning online process (Riley 2003), attempting to define eDemocracy within a traditional paradigm presents problems. Many current definitions appear somewhat inadequate, often placing too much emphasis on the role of government. For example, one of the most widely cited definitions of eDemocracy defines the term as representing the use of ICTs:

...by democratic actors (governments, elected officials, the media, political organizations, citizen/voters) within political and governance processes of local communities, nations and on the international stage. To many, e-democracy suggests greater and more active citizen participation enabled by the internet, mobile communications, and other technologies in today's representative democracy as well as through more participatory or direct forms of citizen involvement in addressing public challenges (Clift 2002, p.1).

Whilst constructive, this definition does not challenge hegemonic assumptions about power or the processes of governance, government or democracy but simply locates ICTs within the status quo. Such a definition perpetuates a narrow view that democratic participation and government is still to be based on traditional representative systems, where a quantitative measure of votes cast (or perhaps of the way votes are cast) is sufficient, yet we are now at the stage where "citizens are feeling a loss of ownership in the democratic process" (Malina and Macintosh 2004, p.267).

As Sunstein (2001) argues, the emergence of the internet seems more likely to result in a polarisation of political debate than a new critical rational discourse simply because it is easy for individuals to find online opinions with which they broadly agree and this is re-enforced by the observation that people inherently tend to avoid political conflict (Witschge 2002). Sunstein does not see this as a negative because the internet has been able to engage people in democratic activities. It is, however, important to be cognisant that "floods of emails from citizens acting without lasting convictions about public problems or lasting interests do not add to the democratic discourse" (Bimber 1999, p.425).

Riley (2003) contends that eDemocracy is most often viewed as a subset of an eGovernance framework and is simply focussed on "how citizens interact with government or influence legislative or public sector process" (p.3). eDemocracy is, if Riley is to be believed, seen in government circles as little more than a way of privileging communication between citizens and a system of government that remains unchallenged. This definition aligns with a traditional definition of democracy espoused by King and Schneider (1991). Such definitions are insufficient in that they perpetuate "the

‘command and control’ process whereby government decides what they think the citizen wants” (Riley p.4).

Is it enough to accept this constrained view of democracy’s place in society and the acknowledged limitation of ICTs within its traditional processes? The potential of ICTs seems to lie not in the destruction of current democratic, parliamentary or legislative processes but in their ability to support a reinvention of these processes based on new participatory contexts (Rushkoff 2003). As Florida puts it:

The old forms don’t work, because they no longer fit the people we’ve become (Florida 2002, p.xii).

Can democracy be extended beyond the traditional narrow borders of the political sphere to include discourses that take place within communities, thereby enhancing the deliberative aspects of democracy further?

Miller (1993) suggests that deliberative democracy can be strengthened by the existence of different fora that support different discourses. This raises possibilities for an eDemocracy model that is formed outside of government, that does not contradict an extension of the representative models discussed above but which offers additional channels for citizens to engage through. Such a model of an engaged, consulted civil society blurs the traditional separation between public and private, government and citizen. Some, such as Surman and Wershler-Henry (2002) would go further, arguing that governments have no place in defining a virtual civil society and that it should be left to citizens to form, structure and populate these new spaces. The true potential of what they describe as ‘commonsense’ lies in the hundreds even thousands of micro-projects and single issue campaigns that draw small numbers of individuals together from time to time, not in the macro level issues of national policy. Dahlberg (2000) concurs when describing online deliberative discussion forums, noting that it is necessary for discourse to be based on the concerns of the public and not be driven or manipulated by bureaucratic or administrative agendas. However, this ignores the issues of coordination, the most efficient use of what is often scarce volunteer labour (Williamson 2003), the economies of scale that can be gained from a cooperative framework and the overarching need for infrastructure projects (such as broadband access and information literacy) that are required for individual projects to be effective.

eDemocracy can be viewed as “true citizen empowerment” (Riley 2003, p.5) where online services provide “not only answers but would engage the citizen in the determination of what questions are to be asked and who decides the issues” (p.5). Whilst this leads towards a more deliberative model in which opinions can be developed through the critical analysis of evidence and debate, it still assumes existing structures and processes as its starting point, uncritically imposing a Westminster-style democracy as the only solution. Blumler and Coleman (2001) observe that public disquiet with government and political practices in the UK allows the internet to be seen as a place to build a new electronic commons. In this online landscape new forms of political and civic involvement can be fostered with ICTs at the heart of government and democracy.

The foregoing suggests that the deliberative capacity of democracy can – in claim at least – re-engage citizens. There is evidence that the internet has certainly had an effect on revitalizing some aspects of deliberative democracy (Coleman and Götze 2002; Coleman 2004; Coleman 2004; Salter 2004), which involves a discourse community where preferences and beliefs can be presented, scrutinized and changed following a more persuasive argument (Dryzek and List 2003). However, “online consultations are not, and will not become, a panacea for disconnection between politicians and citizens” (Coleman 2004, p.20).

Given the preponderance of definitions that simply restate the status quo with the inclusion of ICTs, the challenge would appear to be how to perpetuate such contestability so that citizens (and governments) can produce innovative solutions that challenge power discourses and hegemonies, particularly the technocratic and government-centric views of democracy. The internet has allowed solutions to emerge from the edges, developed by citizens for citizens. These solutions are as important as more formalised methods of communication in creating a true dialogue between citizens and governments.

It is important to recognise that eDemocracy is a two-way process that can be used as a conduit for governments to engage with citizens but also for citizens to create and operate systems and processes that call governments to account. The information age not only strongly supports but requires discussion, it is both an individual media and a collective phenomena, creating an environment that supports distributed models of democracy that are built on strong relationships and which permit feedback loops within the policy development process (Rushkoff 2003). As Feenberg (1999) argues, democratic choice is not about technical or economic efficiencies, rather it depends on a perceived fit

with the interests and beliefs of the societal groups influencing the design process and their relationship to the social environment.

eDemocracy exists within a contextual framework of eGovernance that allows for two possible models of democratic participation. The first is a form of electronic representation based on traditional government-centric consultation models for obtaining input into a representative decision making process, the second a citizen-initiated discourse that offers transformative potential based on concepts of partnership (governments working with citizens). The model shown in Figure 2 below extends what is described in Figure 1 to include actors and networks that originate in the civil society sphere and engage with democratic institutions (and other community actors):

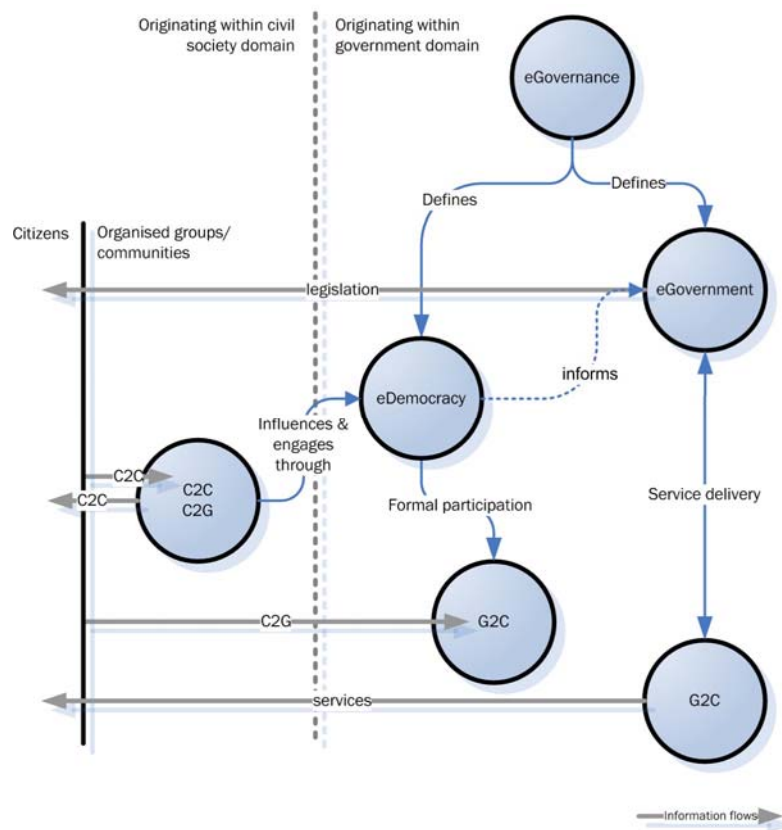


Figure 2: Situating of eDemocracy within a Citizen-centric context.

Definitions of eDemocracy provide a context for an eDemocracy framework that can be more or less citizen focussed. At one extreme existing democratic process is internet-enabled with no regard to democratic engagement or increased participation. At the other, citizens become the creators and owners of new tools of engagement and the potential exist to re-engage and shift power away from the technocratic elites and back to the community.

## **About the Study**

The preceding discussion has established that eDemocracy offers potential for democratic renewal and civic re-engagement at the grass-roots. However, this is not a given and technocratic and bureaucratic colonisation of the democratic process is likely to render eDemocracy a replica of existing real-world practices if left unchecked. This suggests that citizens themselves have a role to play in leading a transformative approach to eDemocracy such that new models are to privilege citizens.

The remainder of this paper describes the attributes of emergent eDemocracy in a local setting and provides a model derived from the provisional findings of a research project that examined the emergence of localised eDemocracy. The ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this research are informed by critical social theory (Outhwaite 1994; Eriksen and Weigård 2003), drawing upon research in the field of community informatics (Gurstein 2000). An interpretive approach was combined with a broadly qualitative methodology. A survey instrument was developed to collect qualitative and quantitative data in order to gain a broad understanding of the use of ICTs amongst people engaged in community activity (the key findings of the survey are discussed elsewhere, for example Williamson and Dekkers 2005). This data was then used to inform semi-structured interviews to collect in-depth qualitative data from participants involved with community informatics initiatives in Waitakere City (early eDemocracy initiatives in the city are discussed in Williamson 2003) or, since the research location is at the early stages of eDemocracy, actors who had expertise with local eDemocracy projects elsewhere. Ten interviews were carried out and the data analysed using a grounded theory method (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Clarke 2005; Charmaz 2006) in order to answer two research questions:

- What impact do ICTs have in facilitating and influencing democratic processes?
- What is an appropriate model for describing the processes required to establish and sustain the effective use of ICTs in regional democratic processes?

## **Discussion of Findings**

The provisional findings suggest that there are a number of key attributes required for eDemocracy practices to emerge within a local community and secondly that emergent eDemocracy is a temporal

process, with a number of key stages, during which actors (and particularly process leaders) are required to adopt different roles. These findings are discussed below.

### ***Perceived Attributes of eDemocracy***

Responses to the survey suggest that the attributes of eDemocracy ground it in the local community. Where eGovernment is delivered from the centre out, eDemocracy initiatives take place at the community level. Indeed, whilst consultation can occur at any level, the process is only considered to be 'eDemocracy' when it:

Focuses more on community, and the active involvement of community [Survey respondent 73].

Two themes relate to engagement and participation in the processes of government, including access to the decision making processes. Respondents alluded to the potential for expanding the extent of consultation, for networking both within existing social and community networks and beyond, for example:

Developing new groups or improving existing groups to enable them to lobby government more effectively. Developing networks between lobby groups with similar aims nationwide and internationally to work together more effectively [Survey respondent 34].

eDemocracy was seen as a way of breaking down barriers to participation in the democratic process by connecting citizens to decision makers more effectively and efficiently but also offering the potential to hold elected officials and particularly bureaucrats more accountable for their actions. It is:

The chance to restructure the roles and relationships between the elected representatives, the bureaucracy and citizens [Survey respondent 137].

On the downside, access to ICTs and the information they carry is not evenly distributed or ubiquitous and those without access become further marginalised as models of eDemocracy emerge:

In this instance membership of the demos is restricted to those with money to ensure access, technical skills, time to search for information, and the belief that they are valued by a society [Survey respondent 26].

## ***An Emergent Model***

The survey findings suggest that respondents viewed eDemocracy as being centred on the needs of citizens, rather than government. The conditions required for this to occur were explored in more detail amongst the interview participants, the preliminary findings of which suggest that for conditions conducive to eDemocracy to emerge, the focus must be on the benefits to people not technological aspects. Generating awareness, and subsequently trust, needs a simple message that keeps ICTs and eDemocracy in perspective:

ICT is complicated and can be confusing, so it needs to be explained simply [Interviewee 6]

Because of its newness, there is a lack of widespread understanding of how ICTs can affect democratic interactions and that

There's a job to be done for those who are advocates of eDemocracy to improve the public understanding of the broad definition [Interviewee 8].

With this in mind, the provisional findings of the research indicate that to create effective grass-roots eDemocracy, seven attributes need to be considered. These attributes can be grouped into technical, social and transformational categories and, whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these attributes in detail, they are described briefly below.

### **Technical sphere**

The technical sphere relates to the application of technology itself, the processes that govern the use of that technology and the solutions that technology supports and, potentially, enhances:

- **ICTs** themselves, their effective use and adoption, issues relating to them including inequity and barriers to adoption;
- **Process**, or what has to happen to transform, change and support processes, who is responsible for this and what barriers or resistance exists; and
- **Solutions** (projects and initiatives) that link technology to process but also recognising, at the strategic level, the importance of sustainability and scalability.

### **Social sphere**

This is the human side; building awareness of what ICTs can do, promoting deliberative models and the technology to make them accessible and the role of community/government in achieving this:

- **Awareness** of ICTs and what they can do;
- **Deliberation** and the process of more effective civic engagement in democratic practices and barriers to that which exist; and
- **Grounded leadership** comes from those who are aware of the potential and can promote new ideas, advocating and leading change. Conversely, such ‘leaders’ can inhibit uptake by failing to communicate effectively or by maintaining the status quo. As one participant observes:

There’s a handful of advocates who are really working hard to advocate from a community perspective what I really like about the way that [x does] it... is that there’s absolute clarity... that this is not about ICT, this is about better communication [Interviewee 5].

### **Transformative praxis**

Change is a socially driven phenomenon which, in the case of eDemocracy, occurs through the alignment of technology adoption with social processes. The key transformative attribute of emergent eDemocracy is that of **disruption**. This refers to disruption of current processes and power structures which leads to opportunities for new processes and solutions enabled by ICTs to emerge. Transformative praxis is the link between the human and the technical and provides the space for a reclaiming of [social] power in order to implement new [technical] systems.

The significance of these attributes is that changes (new or modified strategies, processes, systems) occur in the *technical* sphere through a *transformative* process that originates in the ideas and actions taking place in the *social* sphere (through awareness building and advocacy). The *social* sphere is linked to the *technical* sphere through *transformative praxis*.

These attributes are represented diagrammatically in Figure 3 below (for legibility, the information flows in this diagram have been simplified).

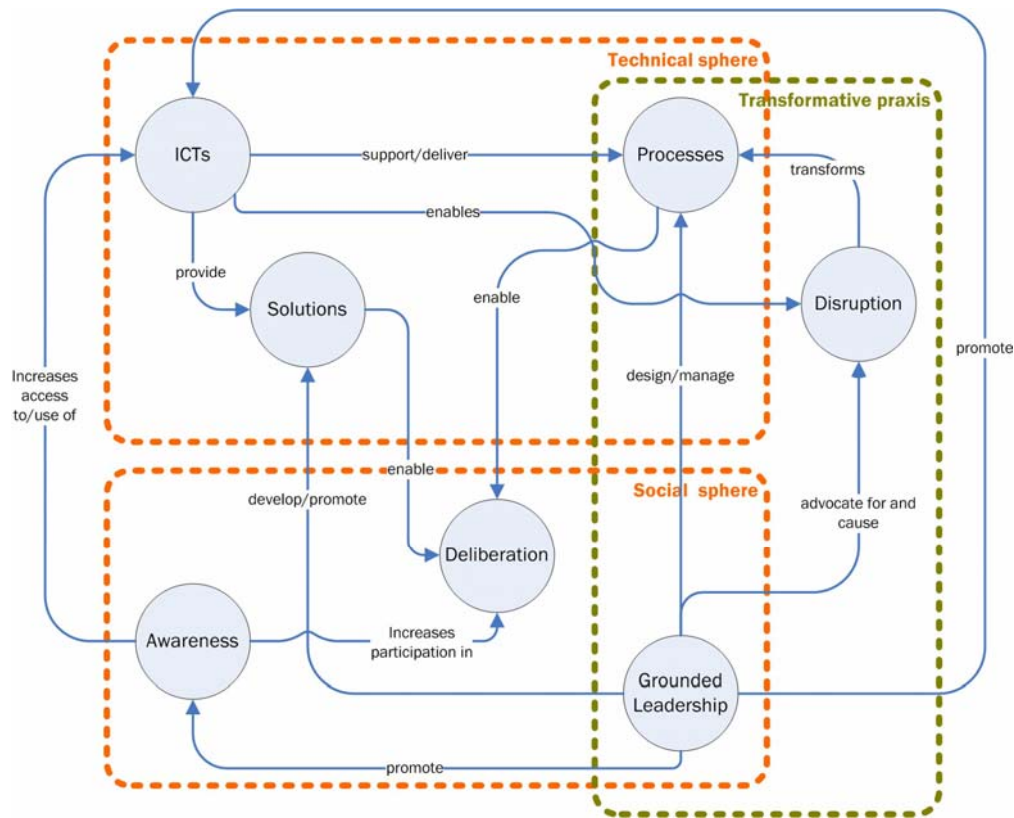


Figure 3: Attributes of emergent grass-roots eDemocracy.

### **Grounded Leadership**

Given the space available, the foregoing discussion does not of itself reveal the process of enablement that must be undertaken if a community is to transition to a more engaged model of democracy via the use of networked ICTs. However, it is evident from both the research findings and this discussion that advocates or activists play a key leadership role in creating and sustaining disruptive spaces such that alternative discourses can arise:

[X] walked into the [Council] Annual Plan process, and I became absolutely committed to [him]. I thought that he stood for the wonder of, if you like, communication and technology so one person made the difference to me [Interviewee 7].

Such spaces can be either physical or virtual and can include underground publishing, email, social software and community meetings. These actors provide ‘grounded leadership’ as existing structures are challenged and new processes emerge. They become the catalysts for emergent eDemocracy. Such activities mirror the traditional life-cycle of social movements, where Moyer (2001, p.84) identifies four primary roles:

- Reformer
- Rebel
- Citizen
- Change agent

Moyer (2001) suggests that each of these roles is needed to create and sustain social movements which work effectively. He suggests that social movements must be seen as responsible *citizens* by the wider public. At the same time, *rebels* must be willing to protest against established policies and social conditions and to speak out against issues that challenge hegemonic assumptions. To be effective, *change agents* are needed who can educate and organise the public to become aware of such issues and then advocate for change. Finally, systems need *reformers* working with them. It is the *reformers* role to integrate new ideas into the mainstream. Notwithstanding that some in leadership roles might attempt to subvert new ICTs in order to maintain existing hegemonies, it is the leaders and activists who influence and affect the stages of change for the wider population through a range of socially-constructed roles and processes.

The research findings suggest that leadership can generate sufficient awareness, first, amongst citizens to increase the demand for eDemocracy and, second, amongst local government, to increasingly value and adopt ICTs within democratic activities. The current research also suggests, however, that the participants in Waitakere City are positioned at the early contemplative and preparatory stage of eDemocracy, where current activities relate to profile raising and small projects that attempt to build broader awareness. As one city councillor commented, eDemocracy is:

Something that's just beyond my grasp at the moment [Interviewee 6].

## Conclusion

Whilst it is easy to see the transformative potential of new ICTs and their potential to impact on the democratic processes of a local community, it is not necessarily obvious how adoption and transformation can occur in a way that privileges citizens above the technocratic and bureaucratic interventions of government. This paper has described models of eDemocracy that range from the simple automation of existing government processes through to citizen empowerment. The research findings suggest that more deliberative and grounded models can potentially halt the decline in

democratic participation and are seen to offer citizens new ways to engage with democratic process. However, for this to occur, a range of conditions and actors must be present such that existing processes can be disrupted and new transformative agendas created.

The leadership role of key actors as agents of change, both within communities and from government has been identified as pivotal. Such actors are catalysts for emergent eDemocracy, providing a link between the human and the technical. This in turn offers the potential to reclaim social power and implement new technical systems which support community goals and privilege community agendas over technocratic interventions.

The findings suggest that whilst such changes manifest in new or modified strategies, processes and systems within the technical sphere, they are the result of disruptive actions that take place amongst actors in the social sphere. As awareness of new methods of participation increases the rates of adoption increase and eventually such processes can themselves become established. It is this process of awareness building and advocacy that leads to social action and the development of transformative praxis, which in turn creates the environment for technical actions to emerge.

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