

Empowering communities to action: Reclaiming local democracy through ICT

Andy Williamson

*Centre for Community Networking Research
Monash University, Australia*

This paper reports on research to develop an emergent model for citizen-centred local eDemocracy. It exposes local democracy as a flawed and failing ideal, where the emergent reality is one of significant frustration on the part of community activists who often feel unheard and where progress is slow and hard-fought. Despite legislation requiring effective consultation, local government intrinsically values the input of community less than its own advice or that of external consultants. Risk mitigation and technocracy are alive and well and they are stifling local democracy. Ironically then, it emerges that expertise in the use of ICT lies in the community, not local government.

This research has identified strategies that can support effective partnerships to support the use of ICT to transform local democracy in a way that privileges citizens' voices. A basic social process of 'grounded leadership' emerges where community and government collaborate in order to bridge the democratic and digital divides so that new models of citizen-based local eDemocracy can emerge. Leadership is temporal and the effectiveness of it depends on the skill-sets and roles adopted with these varying over time. Change emerges as a socially driven phenomenon. In the case of eDemocracy this occurs through the alignment of technology adoption with social process. The key transformative attribute of emergent eDemocracy is that of 'disruption': Current processes and power structures are challenged or superseded leading to the emergence of new processes that are enabled by ICT and grounded in community.

Keywords: eDemocracy, local government, community, grounded theory, mixed methods.

INTRODUCTION

Citizens continue to turn away from traditional and more structured forms of government, tending instead towards an interest in single issues that directly affect them and informal methods of connection and action. This is particularly true at a local government level, where, in the UK at least, only 36% of voting-age adults could identify their local councillor (MORI, 2005). Much is made of the potential of ICT to transform democratic engagement and of the internet's ability to reconnect government and citizens. However, there is limited evidence to suggest that this is actually occurring. It is at best questionable and at worst dangerous to assume that digitally enabling out-dated and flawed processes will breathe new life into them, motivate those who feel disconnected and lead to the development of any kind of sustained sense of democratic vibrancy. Compounding this challenge, citizens (and politicians) are bombarded with news and information delivered through multiple channels at an increasingly fast pace. How then are they to decide what is pertinent or even valid? How are communities to publicise their own issues in an era of globalised media and increasing government technocracy?

This paper will report on the findings of research that set out to examine the effects of using ICT to facilitate and influence democratic processes in a regional community in New Zealand and to identify what factors impact on the adoption of ICT for this purpose. The mixed methods study used quantitative and qualitative methods, guided by critical social theory and a social-critical approach. This paper will provide a summary of the research findings and will describe the basic social process that emerged from the research. This describes a process of 'grounded leadership' relating to a localized context of digital and democratic disenfranchisement. The paper draws on these findings to propose a potential model for engaging with eDemocracy in a sustainable and inclusive way within local

communities. The paper does not provide a literature review on eDemocracy as this can be found elsewhere (for example; Williamson, 2006), it will however, briefly contextualize the research setting and methodology.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

The research was interpretive and participatory and drew on research in the field of community informatics (CI). Data was collected and analysed in two sequential phases. A survey instrument was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data (n=141) from a New Zealand-wide population active in their community and local democratic processes (Williamson & Dekkers, 2005). The results of this phase were then used to develop semi-structured interviews of key informants involved in CI initiatives in a single location, Waitakere City.

Interviews were carried out with eight key local informants and two external participants with practical experience in the topic under investigation. Data was analysed using grounded theory methodology (GTM). This positions the researcher as a participant in the social processes, able to effect change and was appropriate for this research because the researcher was an active participant in the community being studied (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The mixed methods approach allowed the qualitative findings to be more grounded and for the scope of the research to be broadened to discover attributes of community activism, CI and eDemocracy that were not present in the literature, which was appropriate for an emergent field of study such as this (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morse, 2003). The first stage of data collection provided a more complete picture of the emergence of ICT amongst those active in New Zealand civil society, again something lacking in the literature. A sequential design, where one stage commences on completion of the previous stage (Morse, 2003), was chosen to strengthen the results as it can lead to “well-validated and substantiated findings” (Creswell, Plano-Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003, p.229). The sequential approach suited this research because it permitted the scope of the project to be progressively narrowed, starting with a broad review of literature leading to a nationally-targeted survey of ICT use and, finally, a set of questions for specific in-depth local interviews.

EMERGENT EDEMOCRACY

The next section will briefly introduce and situate the concept of emergent eDemocracy, there then follows a discussion of the key findings from the research and a discussion of the basic social process, grounded leadership. This is followed by discussion of a model that describes the processes, phases and roles necessary for citizen-based eDemocracy to emerge and become sustainable.

Contrary to the majority of literature in the field, the research findings suggest that participants saw eDemocracy as being centred on the needs of citizens, rather than government. The conditions required for this to occur were explored in detail amongst the interview participants and the findings suggest that, for conditions conducive to eDemocracy to emerge, the focus must be on the benefits to citizens, not government, and not on the technological aspects. Generating awareness and subsequently trust is necessary and this requires a simple message that keeps ICT and eDemocracy in perspective:

ICT is complicated and can be confusing, so it needs to be explained simply [IV5]

The research shows that eDemocracy exists within a contextual framework of eGovernance that allows for two possible models of democratic participation. The first is a form of electronic participation based on traditional government-centric consultation models for obtaining input into a representative decision making process. The second includes citizen-initiated discourses that offer transformative potential based on concepts of partnership (governments working with citizens and vice versa). The latter extends traditional representative government to encapsulate more deliberative and participatory processes where actors and networks originating in the civil society sphere are empowered and can not only actively engage with democratic institutions but also be responsible for the shaping and control of them.

Although the transformative potential of ICT emerges from the interview findings, its actual potential to positively and sustainably impact on democratic processes in a local community remains problematic. The findings suggest that it cannot be assumed that adoption of ICT and any subsequent democratic transformation will occur in a way that privileges citizens above the technocratic and bureaucratic interventions of government. In fact it is clear that this cannot be left to chance.

Literature broadly constructs eDemocracy as ranging from the simple automation of existing government processes for engagement through to citizen empowerment, locating this in a wider discussion of democracy,

community and ICT. This research supports this continuum in so far as it indicates that ICT can offer citizens a new way to engage with democratic process, thereby potentially halting the decline in democratic participation. However, there is little in the published literature to suggest how one might go about creating an effective environment in which eDemocracy can flourish. The risk appears that eDemocracy provides no more than new tools for a technocratic elite and for those already engaged with democracy. There remains a lack of widespread understanding of how ICT 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 [IV6].

The research findings suggest that sustainable engagement requires a range of conditions to be created and that key roles must be performed such that the existing processes are disrupted and new transformative agendas created. Primary amongst these conditions is the role of 'grounded leadership' within communities and government.

KEY FINDINGS

The survey findings show that ICT is becoming a significant resource for the community and voluntary sector in New Zealand, although barriers to more effective use clearly exist. The findings suggest that the internet is most likely to be used as a source of information or a tool for communication, rather than for publishing new ideas or views, although this is happening. This indicates that internet use is in the relatively early stages of maturity and is reflected in the way government utilises the internet to interact with communities. This locates current local eDemocracy initiatives as targeting Dahl's democratic ideal of 'enlightened understanding' rather than attempting to support 'effective participation' (Dahl, 1989).

This research shows that current models of local democracy are a flawed and failing ideal. Even in Waitakere City, regarded as a leader in community consultation in New Zealand (Craig & Lerner, 2002), the emergent reality is of significant frustration on the part of community activists (the researcher included), who often feel unheard and the little progress that is made is slow in coming and hard-fought (the battle metaphor is not accidental). The Local Government Act 2002 was designed to create more consultative models of local government, however, in reality this has failed to avert the democratic crisis. Despite the rhetoric, council intrinsically values the input of community less than its own internal advice or the advice of paid external consultants. As Wright (2006) suggests, risk mitigation and technocracy are alive and well and they are stifling local democracy. It is as if a game is being played, where community input is sought but only acted upon when it aligns with council's own agenda. A theme to emerge from this research is 'benevolent bullying': Council appears on the surface to 'play fair' and engage with community but in reality it arrogantly positions itself as expert and community as less informed, even troublesome and certainly problematic. This is similar to the experience of Swedish local government described by Ranerup (2000) and suggests colonisation of the lifeworld through imposed technocratic process, similar to that described by Ritzer (2000). Ironically, the assumption of council as expert is flawed when it comes to ICT. This research suggests that the expertise does in fact lie with the community and that council has consistently impeded progress, struggling to grasp the implications of new technologies and is often dismissive of them or threatened by them. It is clear that those working on CI initiatives (both inside and outside council) continue to face significant challenges to make even limited progress.

The findings reveal that new or modified strategies, processes and systems occur in the technical sphere through a transformative praxis that originates in the ideas and actions taking place in the social sphere, through awareness building and advocacy. Within society, ICT must be adopted and integrated into democratic life so that they realise sufficient perceived value. For this to happen, ICT must be available and so policy frameworks must guide ICT adoption, targeting effective use. Failure to do so exacerbates digital exclusion.

Social transformation is required to build awareness and adoption of new methods of engagement. Hegemonic power structures must be challenged through a number of different roles, ranging from radical destabilising to collaborative process transformation. Local citizen-centric eDemocracy becomes possible when:

1. Citizens' barriers to access are reduced, they have the pre-requisite literacy skills and are aware of a wide-range of content.
2. Citizens see value in new processes of engagement and are motivated to participate in civil society.
3. The processes of engagement allow citizens to create and manage them and in a way that privileges discourses amongst citizens and their ability to act on the consequences of such discourses.

If eDemocracy is to move beyond information provision and narrow models of government-managed engagement, extending the democratic model past an electronically-enabled status quo, then the findings suggest that it is critical for citizens as well as governments to take and lead action. This research suggests that effective engagement will only occur by working from both ends of the democratic spectrum, sometimes pushing against existing power structures and at other times working with them, to allow for new spaces for effective engagement to emerge. Increased participation in local democracy will not occur because of ICT alone, it is a dual process of increasing engagement (for example, building awareness of issues – which ICT can support) and harnessing new technology to reduce the barriers to engagement. As Figure 1 shows, increased awareness leads to greater motivation to become involved. In parallel, as barriers to participation are reduced the threshold for active participation is lowered:

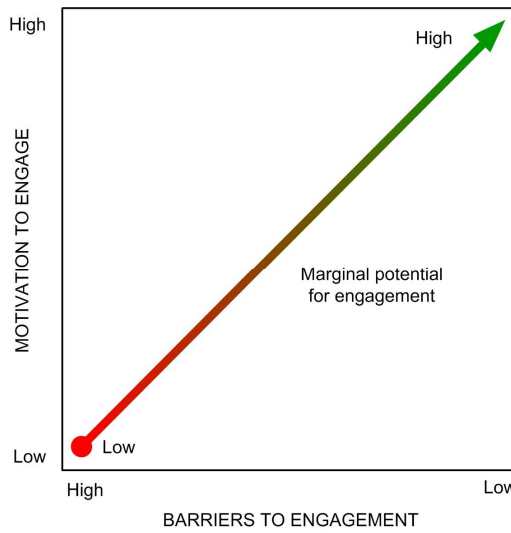


Figure 1: Motivation versus barriers to participation.

Technology is not the key to this engagement happening – it is the power and increasing importance of information and communication that matters (Keeble & Loader, 2001). Citizens must demand a role in constructing models of government, must act to ensure that their views are heeded and must ensure that they have open and effective channels that support deliberative discourses. It is naïve to assume that ICT will transform democracy and re-invigorate local decision making if the focus remains on projects and technology. The findings indicate that eDemocracy will not support the re-engagement of citizens if it is left solely as the domain of governments and their technocratic partners.

Whilst the findings support the argument that ICT lowers the barriers to effective democratic engagement (Coleman, 2004; O’Loughlin, 2001; Schuler, 2000) this requires those already engaged with both local democracy and ICT to advocate for their uptake and to actively develop and promote examples of how they can be used. Re-engagement, if it is to happen, will be gradual. Those who are active will influence those around them, and so the pattern of adoption ripples out from there. This is the same within the community sector and in government; committed and enthusiastic leaders are required who can communicate in the language of stakeholders to push new models of engagement and the use of ICT to achieve these.

The findings show that, where ICT is being used, communication and the flow of information are improved. The findings also point to a deficit in terms of knowledge and access. They show that immediacy of access plays a pivotal part in continuous adoption and effective use. Issues of ICT literacy and the time and skills required to become effective users are highlighted. Therefore, new democratic models alone are not enough even if these emerge from the community and initiatives must be developed in parallel that address ubiquity of access, the rollout and adoption of broadband and ensuring that all of society has the opportunity to become information and ICT literate.

GROUNDED LEADERSHIP

As well as barriers to effective local eDemocracy, this research has identified strategies that can support effective partnerships and which can start a process of transformation within local democracy. The basic social process for emergent local eDemocracy was identified, namely 'grounded leadership'. Within the study, this emerges for both community and local government actors, who must collaborate in order to bridge the two structures for citizen-based local eDemocracy to emerge. Leadership is temporal and the effectiveness of it depends on the skill-sets and roles adopted with these varying over time. Change emerges as a socially driven phenomenon which, in the case of eDemocracy, occurs through the alignment of technology adoption with social process. The key transformative attribute of emergent eDemocracy is that of 'disruption': Current processes and power structures are challenged or superseded leading to the emergence of new processes that are enabled by ICT and grounded in the community.

The foregoing discussion presents research findings that suggest potential value in using ICT to enhance and extend democratic participation. However, for this to occur, a set of conditions must be created in which people are both able and motivated to engage. The key factor in this occurring is the role of significant lead actors who take on a position of 'grounded leadership', which is a form of leadership that:

1. is required to work effectively at a community level;
2. is grounded in its stakeholder community in order to be able to encourage and engage people with ICT; and
3. can effectively bridge and link different stakeholder groups.

There was recognition amongst participants that certain key individuals promoted the importance of ICT, thereby creating more awareness. The attributes of this role included:

1. Being an evangelist in the community.
2. Being able to bridge the needs and aspirations of different stakeholders.
3. Taking on a leadership and advocacy role within local government.
4. Promoting common standards.

Regardless of who led the CI initiative, clarity and simplicity were of primary importance:

What I really like is that there's absolute clarity [IV3].

Participants note that the issue is primarily one of better communication, not ICT per se. Some in the community were perceived as making ICT appear too complicated, focusing on the detail, re-enforcing technophobia and failing to engage others. For others, the timing as well as the simplicity of the message mattered:

I was excited when [x] walked into the Annual Plan process, and I became absolutely committed... I thought that he stood for the wonder of communication and technology, so one person made the difference to me [IV4].

Local government saw it as beneficial that community activists develop local initiatives and promote the 'big picture', in part because they lacked the knowledge and skills to do so themselves. Local government is only able to perform limited awareness building, it lacks the resources and is not always the appropriate vehicle for this. Instead community-based 'technology champions' can be used more effectively and therefore it makes sense for council to support that role. This finding aligns well with CI's implicit shift away from acceptance of an essentialising technocratic top-down approach, recognizing that solutions emerge from within communities themselves (Marshall & Taylor, 2004; Schuler & Day, 2004). In reverse, opportunities were also identified where community advocates could champion ICT within council and monitor resistance to new technology.

Effective leadership acts horizontally as well as vertically, bridging different groups and stakeholders. This way, expertise in one group can be shared with others. Fora already existed for this to occur and the role of key stakeholders was crucial for promoting the uptake and effective use of ICT. Bridging stakeholders can help to resolve issues of equitable participation and who (if anyone) controls a process, which is important because:

Management of the process can open or close discussion [IV9].

At a more strategic level, the bridging of stakeholders is vital to sustainability. A commonly recurring issue with CI initiatives is that key initiators are not the right people to operationalise a project (B. Craig & Williamson, 2005a; Williamson, 2003). This leads to project failure as people move on to new ideas and projects. Bridging of different

stakeholder groups potentially allows this to be overcome by better resourcing the operational side of community groups or key people who groups can call upon for support.

Notwithstanding the inherent conservatism and barriers that exist, the size, responsibilities and resources that are available to local government make their role pivotal in developing new forms of democratic engagement (Needham, 2004; Wright, 2006). Realistically, if new processes are to emerge, local government will play an important role in supporting them. Whilst resistance to technology might exist, the current power structures suggest that government will have to at least tacitly accept new processes if they are to gain momentum:

If we are wedded to utilising ICT to enhance the democratic process the role of making that happen is going to be those who stand to gain the most from it [IV1].

The role of grounded leadership emerges as being critical to the establishment and success of citizen-centred eDemocracy. It is not sufficient that this occurs solely in the community, although this is vital, it must also happen within local government. Local actors are required who are able to motivate, engage and lead both sides – community and government – and who can work together to bridge the needs of different stakeholder groups effectively. These findings highlight that emergent eDemocracy is temporal, with a number of key stages, during which actors (and particularly process leaders) are required to adopt different roles. As awareness of new methods of participation increases the rates of adoption increase and eventually such processes can themselves become established. These roles and processes are described below.

ESTABLISHING NEW MODELS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Recognising the primary importance of situating CI initiatives within their social setting suggests that a strategy is needed to describe the processes by which grounded leadership can facilitate and promote the transformative potential of ICT and to privilege the necessary advocacy, awareness building and disruptive practices that are required to initiate and sustain transformation. The research findings show that the leadership role of grounded advocates is of critical importance and this is reflected in the attributes of an emergent eDemocracy process described above. Such actors create disruptive spaces such that alternative discourses can arise and these spaces can be either physical or virtual and can include underground publishing, social software or community meetings.

This section will explore a model of engagement that recognises individual motivations to engage and the changing roles that key actors perform in order to situate a number of key processes that were identified from the data in the context of an overall model for emergent citizen-focussed eDemocracy. Two existing theoretical models are drawn on to offer a framework for engagement that is technology agnostic and communally oriented. These are the Transtheoretical Model of Change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997) and Moyer’s lifecycle for social movements (Moyer, 2001). Combining these models provides a framework in which to locate the key social and community attributes of emergent eDemocracy and results in a process-oriented view of the ways in which ICT is adopted within a democratic context.

The Transtheoretical Model of Change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997), which is often implemented as Motivational Interviewing, emerged from decision-making theory and motivational psychology. This incorporates a trans-theoretical model of the stages of change, which act as a central construct around which individuals can modify behaviour (originally this model was focussed on overcoming addictive behaviours) (Velicer, Prochaska, Fava, Norman, & Redding, 1988). The model includes a series of independent variables which refer to both the process of change which must occur and a series of outcome measures. The stages of change can be used to define key stages of awareness and process maturity with regard to an emergent eDemocracy process and individual engagement with that. This can be expressed as five levels of awareness and action (or readiness), which are linear and temporal:

Table 1: Stages of change.

Precontemplation	The person is not aware or not yet ready to consider that change is needed.
Contemplation	There is some awareness of the necessity (or desire) to change but resistance and ambivalence remains.
Preparation	At this stage people have become receptive to change and are actively considering how to make the changes needed.
Action	Actors are now engaged with making changes and adopting new ways of being or doing.
Maintenance	The changes are complete and new ways are now maintained.

Whereas traditional change models focus on influencing social norms, the Transtheoretical Model is based on individual motivation and intent. It is appropriate to grass-roots democratic engagement because such a model resists systemic pressures to change, relying instead on individual motivation and valuing of the process or desired outcome (Wilhelm, 2000). A key precept of motivational interviewing is that it is the individual who must engage when they are ready, rather than the system forcing change.

Motivation and awareness extends to the general population, encompassing government actors, civil society and activists. It is this latter group who provide ‘grounded leadership’ as existing structures are challenged and new processes emerge. The catalyst for emergent eDemocracy, therefore, comes from this group. Such activities mirror the traditional life-cycle of social movements and Moyer (2001, p.84) suggests that actors within such movements have four primary roles:

1. Reformer
2. Rebel
3. Citizen
4. Change agent

As Moyer (2001) argues, 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.

The actions of the activists influence and affect the stages of change for the wider population, leading through a range of socially-constructed roles and process that describe an emergent eDemocracy lifecycle, as represented in Figure 2.

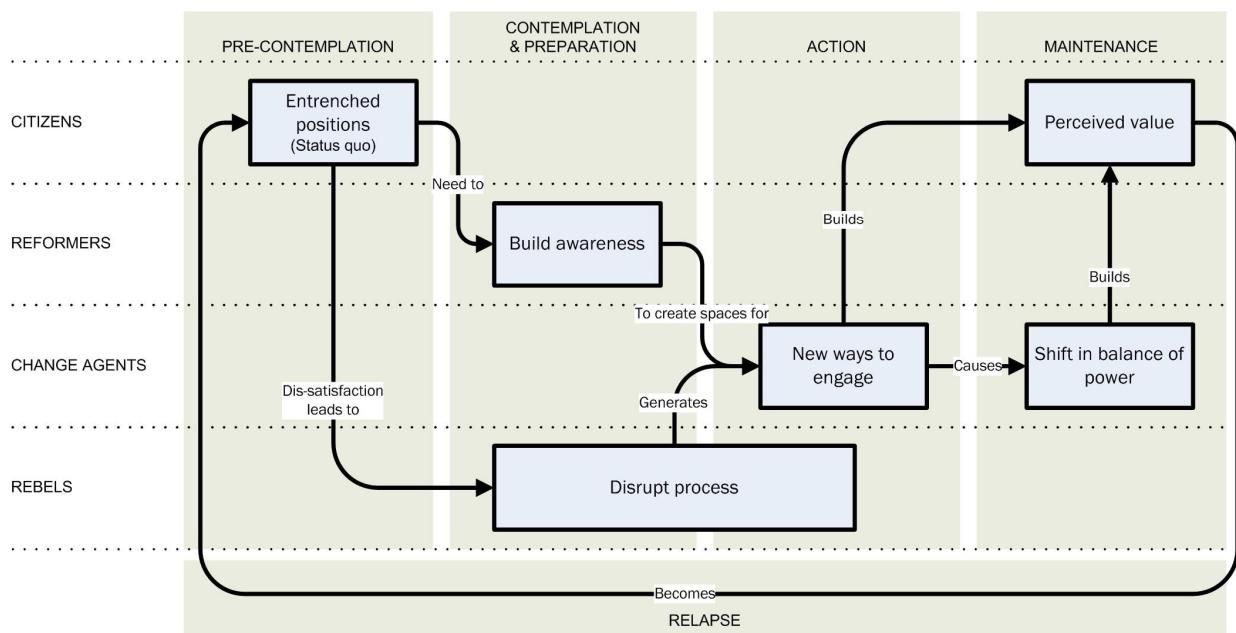


Figure 2: Emergent eDemocracy Lifecycle.

This diagram incorporates key actions that must occur at each stage, which are derived from the categories which emerged from the interview phase of the research. The categories shown in Figure 2 can be explored with regard to their implications and the different roles required, as Table 2 shows.

Table 2: Key stages

Entrenched positions	At the start of the process the status quo creates a sufficient level of
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	disaffection that early-adopters of eDemocracy become active in attempting to force debate and promote alternatives.
Building awareness	This early activity creates limited but growing awareness and activism continues, however, this group is now joined by those who see opportunities for reforming the processes.
Disruption to existing processes	Identification of an opportunity has occurred and awareness building will eventually lead to the emergence of new models of engagement, some of which occur through the reformation of existing processes and others emerge from a transformative model that subverts existing practices. At this stage, success is dependent on key actors adopting and promoting new ways of engaging such that they can be translated into language understood by ordinary citizens.
New ways to engage	If the change agents have been successful, the ideas that have been promoted now start to be adopted by the mainstream and become normative practice.
Shift in balance of power	If the process has been sufficiently transformative then shifts in the balance of power should occur. Citizens have become more empowered and are more able to influence democratic process.
Perceived value	Models have been developed and processes refined and communicated such that citizens now see value in working this way and generally accept eDemocracy. At this point, eDemocracy becomes the status quo way of functioning.

Having reached the point where this is a general uptake of eDemocracy amongst citizens, new power-blocks and alliances can once again start to exert influence and the novelty of the new wears off. Relapse is now a potential problem, where the new systems become entrenched and fail to respond to individual needs. At this point there is a risk that a new power-elite, or bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1996), will emerge to replace the previous one.

This research suggests that participants (in Waitakere at least) are currently positioned at a contemplation and preparation stage: current activities relate to profile raising and small projects that attempt to build broader awareness. As one participant, a city councillor commented, eDemocracy is:

Something that's just beyond my grasp at the moment [IV5].

CONCLUSION

This research has identified and described processes that occur between and within a community and local government that can lead to the adoption of eDemocracy practices that can privilege citizens. Through a mixed methods study it has identified and discovered how ICT is being used, what barriers prevent effective uptake and what strategies can lead to improvements in the adoption of ICT per se and, specifically, to support community-led democratic engagement.

eDemocracy is shown to be more than internet-enabling the processes of local democracy, for the participants, it incorporates strategies to ensure the equitable and effective use of ICT as well. To make this happen, the research has shown that a process of transformation occurs, originating in the social sphere, where grounded leadership drives and supports change through technical actions that lead to transformed democratic processes. The value of ICT lies in the potential to lower the barriers to democratic engagement and to provide tools which communities can develop and manage for themselves. Citizen-led local eDemocracy does not remove or challenge the role of representative government, it does however widen the options for how democracy occurs, allowing for the creation of more deliberative, issues-based and individually-focussed platforms for engagement.

As awareness and adoption increase and as barriers are overcome, perceived value increases and new processes can emerge. If these are effective and inclusive then they offer additional opportunities for those already engaged and new opportunities for those who are not. The basic social process that anchors emergent eDemocracy is grounded leadership. Without this processes are not sustainable (and some are unlikely to start) and the speed of adoption is slowed or halted. Without clear and strong leadership from both council and community entrenched values become insurmountable and projects fail.

ICT is a tool to be harnessed by communities and government and leadership is required from both sides. Effective eDemocracy platforms will only emerge if the grounded leadership exists within both local communities and government to promote and support them.

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