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Democratising e-Governance in the City of Tampere

Introduction

The promotion of information society development and the development of citizen participation have an important role in the strategy of the City of Tampere. Even before the Internet revolution the open provision of information was expected to guarantee that citizens are aware of municipal affairs and have enough information to participate in the planning and preparation in municipal policy-making processes. Due to the introduction of the Internet by the city government since the mid-1990s all the agendas and relevant information have been made available for citizens. In addition, new electronic feedback and discussion forums and special inquiry systems were developed since 1996.

To make local information society and e-democracy work is not an easy task, though. Views and opinions gathered via the Internet are biased to some extent, if compared with the views of the whole population. This is why also more conventional ways of citizen-city administration interaction are used along with electronic means. The city government has also paid a lot of attention to training citizens to use the new electronic tools and invested on free public access points and terminals, in order to pave way for an inclusive local information society.

In this chapter these developments are discussed and assessed on the basis of the development stage model of e-government, with a special view to e-democracy and e-participation. From the point of view of citizens, it is assessed what their actual chances

to receive information and to participate in decision-making processes are and what measures have been taken to guarantee sustainability and inclusiveness.

Aspects of developing democratic e-governance

Citizen-centered e-governance

At local level the key players in e-governance are local authorities and various stakeholders, the latter falling into three basic groups: public bodies, business community, and local civil society, ranging from NGOs and local associations to active individual citizens. Citizens in different roles – as constituency, taxpayers, political activists, workforce, inhabitants, and service users – form the most important local stakeholder group in self-governing local community.

The point of departure of e-governance should be the community and, within it, individual citizens, so that whatever applications, e-services and communication tools are introduced, they should fit in with the features of local community and be based as much as possible on citizens' needs and their patterns of behavior. Deciding on resources allocated to municipal services etc. is formally vested to the representative system of government, the local council at its heart. Yet, when other forms of democracy gradually develop to revitalise democratic practices, citizens may gain more direct political control and power over policy-making issues and governance processes. Besides the genuine demand for more direct citizen control, this transformation is generally expected to strengthen citizens' commitment to their communities, their compliance with social and legal norms, and the utilisation of local potentials and know-how in community development.

Conditions for the democratisation of e-governance

Developing local democratic e-governance is a purposeful effort to democratise practices of public governance with the help of new ICTs. This is, actually, what many governments have done all over the world since the 1970s, as ably shown by Becker and Slaton (2000) (see also McLaverty 2002).

A contextual starting point for democratic local e-governance is the overall information society development and related development policies, and institutional and legal frameworks. Another important aspect is that of e-readiness, which subsumes technological readiness, behavioral e-readiness (needs, motivation, access, capacity, and skills), and socio-cultural e-readiness, which is about cultural, political and institutional openness to and reservations about e-transformation in democracy.

Another way to systematise the democratic use and development of ICTs is to apply the model of development stages of e-government, which highlights the steps and the order of actions to be taken when proceeding from the current situation towards the e-government vision. The phases that have generally observed to be sequential in e-government development are usually presented in four-fold scheme (see Macintosh et al. 2002; Grönlund 2000; UNDPEPA & ASPA 2002):

- Web presence and information provision
- Simple interaction and two-way communication
- Advanced interaction and transaction services
- e-Transformation in government (integrated and seamless service and governance systems).

In a similar way democratic e-government can be developed through such basic phases as provision of information, two-way communication (e.g. feedback), political interaction and transaction (e.g. e-consultation and e-referendum), and fully

transformed practices and systems of democratic e-governance (see Becker 2001; Macintosh et al. 2002; Gross 2002; Anttiroiko 2004a).

Evolution of e-democracy in Tampere

Establishment and early years of the website of the city

In the mid-1990s, Tampere was one of the first cities in Finland to set up a municipal website. Established in 1994 in English, Tampere's first website was primarily targeted to non-Finns looking for information about Tampere. The local authorities' own server was at first set up internally, and in the spring of 1995 the Intranet was connected to the Internet. At that time it was believed in the city administration that such an intranet constituted the most central usage of www technologies, and it was maintained for some time alongside www site of the city.

In March 1995, the city government got its first www-server under the domain name www.tac.fi, which became the home of all Tampere-related material, previously located on the server of the local telephone company TPO. In May the municipal IT department applied for the tampere.fi domain and adopted it to complement the old tac.fi. The first content for the address www.tampere.fi was generated at this point and the tac.fi was allocated for the Intranet system only (Anttiroiko 2004b).

As the provision of content to the web site of the city government was in the early years largely in the responsibility of communication professionals of the city government, the very first material to be put on line comprised press releases, descriptions of the local administrative sectors and promotional materials produced by the business services section. Photographs of the City Council and the City Board were made available in October 1995, but no-one thought of complementing them with the e-mail addresses of the councilors and board members, which

goes to show how unfamiliar this new means of communication still was.

The first attempts to bring the agenda of the various municipal bodies on line were made in late 1995, but it was the automatic release system adopted in early April 1996 that made them regularly available. Since then, the agenda for the meetings of the municipal bodies, City Council and City Board included, have been available on the Internet as soon as the preparing official forwards them for duplication. After the meetings, the agenda are updated to become records.

Increased web-based communication since 1996

In addition to the informative content, *interactive* usage has always been an important objective of the municipal website. At the very simplest this means providing the citizens with the e-mail addresses of the elected officials and public employees, which soon proved to be an efficient way to encourage feedback. Back in 1996, more systematic participation channels were few. Early examples include an petition from the spring of 1996 organised by steamship enthusiasts appealing for the restoration of SS Pohjola. E-mailed to the mayor, the petition was received with due procedure and submitted to the preparing authorities just like any other written initiative made by the citizens (Anttiroiko 2004b).

The spring of 1996 saw the opening of a *discussion forum*, where citizens could participate using either their own names or aliases. Appropriate messages were put on line after being passed by a moderator. The local authorities wanted to collect opinions on significant projects in their preparation phase, and the first subject was the refurbishment of the Central Square. The 100 contributions received at the forum during the viewing period of the general plan for the square were included in the revisions

of the plan. Other topics to attract ‘unofficial points of view’ via on-line debate were the future of Tampere and the municipal emblems.

The local election in the autumn of 1996 was the first occasion to test the Internet as an *electoral information and communication forum*. This was done by providing the voters and the candidates with a place to meet and discuss. Furthermore, the website contributed by providing basic election information, including the lists of candidates, poll stations, polling times and the results of the previous election. On the election day, the results were put on line directly from the vote-counting system. These basic contents were part of the website of the following local election as well. On each occasion, though, the authorities have wanted to provide the website with something new, to attract the citizens’ attention and get them to vote.

Adopting new tools to understand citizens’ preferences since 1997

In order to improve the knowledge-base of the development of e-government, more information on citizens’ interests and preferences was needed. As long as the Internet remained a mere curiosity, there was no need to take it seriously within administration. Very quickly, however, the Internet became too significant a phenomenon to be developed only on the basis of a rule of thumb. This led the city administration to design new model by which to systematically keep track of the wishes and preferences of active web users.

The first Internet user survey was carried out in 1997. According to its results, two thirds of the visitors to Tampere’s website are from Tampere. In addition to numbers, local residents are the principal users of the site also in terms of frequency: locals visit the site more often than people living elsewhere. Some 50%

of Tampere-based respondents reported visiting the municipal site at least once a week. At first, the most important reason for visiting Tampere's website was to obtain events information. Since 1997, user surveys have been arranged on a yearly basis. The primary purposes of visiting the website have shifted towards official dealings with the authorities and accessing services, whereas political participation is still for the few.

In the spring of 1999, the first 'Talousoorumi' (Municipal Finance Forum) was arranged. It is an open inquiry gathering citizens' opinions with regard to issues to be addressed in the preparation of the next year's budget. Since then, the Municipal Finance Forum has been carried out every year, with slightly changing content and priorities. Together with city council's priorities, the results of the Forum in question have been a basis for the preparation of the budget. Yet, as the system is based on representative democracy, the city council has the final say in all aspects of the budgetary decision making.

Table 1. The development of the number of the survey respondents

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Discussion forum	250	159	263	468	519	394	449	664	781
Citizens' Q and A booth				180	229	218	208	247	271
Internet user survey		1 000	280	665	1 188	1 274	1 358	1 271	1 109
Municipal Finance Forum				678	654	314	739	1447	657
Internet				558	430	160	652	1295	545
paper form				120	224	154	87	152	112
Finance and traffic consultation (authentication)							260		
Digital ID card							22		
"Netposti" user ID							238		
SMS consultation (finance)							93		
Strategy consultation					104				
newspaper					70				
Internet					34				
Election initiatives					107				
free distribution paper					61				
Internet					46				
Initiative vote (Internet)					484				
Town planning games				284	350				
Winter maintenance of streets						200	355	294	119
Housing strategy							325		
Environmental strategy						27	6		
Internet survey of Parks Department					170				
Component master plan for traffic; Internet							414	375	
questionnaire on paper								69	
written opinions								25	
Participation survey							178		
Senior citizens' info service naming competition									
free distribution paper								94	
Internet								150	
SMS service responses							250		
responses							120		
Curriculum							17		
Valma preparation forum								340	349
Survey for course ideas at Adult Education Centre									162

In the autumn of 1999 the '*Kansalaiskioski*' (Citizen Booth or Citizen Kiosk) was opened. It is an electronic questions and answers booth on municipal issues for citizens with a volume of more than 200 questions/answers per year. This and some other applications of e-government have raised a question of how to categorise e-mail as a means of communication: is it a parallel to telephone or a written document? Namely, many officials take the communication via e-mails more seriously than the use of telephone, which creates slightly higher threshold to the use of e-mail. It is a written document that can be stored and may be used later should it be needed at a later stage of a certain process. From the point of view of citizens the picture is almost the opposite, for e-mail has become a popular means of citizen-to-government communication. It has for some time been more popular than a telephone. The amount of official mail to the city government has remained more or less the same despite the increased use of e-mails in making inquiries and asking for information.

The first town planning game providing the opportunity to digitally play around with various zoning alternatives was launched in the summer of 1999. The game illustrated vacant building land in various parts of the city and offered various ways of filling them up with new residents. The game illustrated several alternative scenarios by modelling different construction solutions with images. Participants could send their viewpoints straight to the planner. A second town planning game was launched in 2000, and since October 2001 all pending town plans are available via the Internet and complemented with a commenting channel. Plans are illustrated in an on-line map with a participation form that can be sent to the planner. Actually, the Internet has proved to be very useful tool in town planning, as the plans can be presented in an illustrative manner and with simple visualisation, added with an opportunity to gather feedback and opinions conveniently during the planning process.

Representative e-democracy in the early 2000s

Since the beginning of 2002, citizens have been able to make official initiatives on the Internet and monitor their progress on line. At first participants were authenticated with the help of a digital ID card, but since November 2003, authentication for submitting initiatives has been carried out by user ID and password.

As the Finnish local democracy is based on representative system, a large part of citizen involvement must somehow be connected to the functioning of this system. First steps were taken already in the latter half of the 1990s by increasing information on formal decision-making process, such as securing the availability of minutes and agendas. A new turn took place since the spring of 2002 when it became possible to monitor council initiatives and their processing via the Internet. Since late 2002 voting results of the council have been available on line immediately after council meetings. Before the Internet, those interested had to wait until the minutes of the meeting were published. The voting behavior of each councilor can be tracked through an online seat map.

Another extension of representative e-democracy is the Valma preparation forum launched in April 2003. It makes it possible for citizens to bring forward their opinions concerning issues on the agendas of the committees and participate in discussion. Opinions are e-mailed directly to the elected officials and municipal employees concerned and collected into a summary enclosed in the minutes of the committee. Valma brings democratic e-governance to a new level, as it involves people to the daily preparatory work of city administrations and committees. It seems, though, that the extent to which this attracts the attention of ordinary people, however, depends largely on the matter under discussion rather than the tool used. This implies that Valma as such may not increase participation to

a new heights, but rather provides another tool which is available for those interested in participating in decision making at the preparatory phase of the process.

As mentioned, the first discussion forum was set up in 1996. Since then the number of topics presented to the public have increased so that in 2003 they numbered 19. Currently the most popular topics include traffic and communications, public finances and services, and issues raised in the Valma preparation forum. Contributions amount to more than 600 a year. The number is not huge but not negligible, either. Before the Internet, the only places to discuss local affairs in public were the letters to the editor in local newspapers and some occasional public discussion events. The discussion forum can actually be considered the first interactive section of the web site of the city government. The city administration works as a mediator which tries to engage officials and political representatives to participate in the discussions and comment the viewpoints presented by discussants. Yet, the reality is that these forums are mainly a sphere of the discussions of ordinary citizens.

Before the local election of 2000 a call was sent out for so-called election initiatives with the result of 150 suggestions brought forward. A vote was arranged and five winning initiatives were submitted to the new city council. The most popular initiative, attracting the majority of all votes, suggested the building of a dance pavilion. Before the 2004 election, the municipality set up its own candidate selection application to help voters find the candidate whose values and opinions on current issues match best with those of the citizens. As many as 390 candidates (70% of the total in Tampere) submitted their responses to the application, and more than 13,000 voters used the application, which is fairly high rate (roughly 8% of 157,000 eligible voters).

Voting via the Internet has also been experimented with in Tampere. In the autumn of 2003, the students of the Tampere Polytechnic voted on line at the students' union election, using the electronic eTampere card as a means of authentication. The system is technically feasible, but the privacy of the very act of voting remains a problem that hinders a wider adoption of e-voting method in local elections.

**Summary: Evolution of the web-based activities
from 1995 to 2005**

The principal content of the website of the City of Tampere comprises informative material, complemented by increasing number of interactive channels between the residents of the city and elected officials and municipal employees. The feedback channels are an essential part of the site, and in addition to the Internet, questions and comments can be sent by SMS. The contact information of elected officials is also widely available. The discussion forum is now an established channel of participation. Several polls and surveys are arranged every year and a wide range of interesting issues are raised at the Q & A booth.

The local authorities are still working hard to improve the opportunities of on-line participation. One good example is the Valma preparation forum, enabling the citizens to have their say concerning issues processed in committees and forward their comments straight to their representatives. Nevertheless, all this is still a very narrow slice of all that is possible to encourage on-line participation. True challenges are still the political will and institutional arrangements that really open up decision sphere to the public, not the technical tools used in democratic governance processes.

Assessing the democratisation of e-governance

Access to information as a precondition of democratic e-governance

Access to information is a basic condition to democratic governance and policy-making. In Finland, it has been possible to develop e-democracy on the basis of a traditionally transparent public administration. A major turn took place in 1977 due to the enforcement of then new Local Government Act which stated that municipalities must openly release information concerning the preparation of municipal issues (the present law on local government is Local Government Act.365/1995 which has a similar emphasis on openness and transparency).

Ensuring the constant availability of information is, of course, an ongoing project. According to various surveys, between 57–73% of the residents of Tampere think that their access to municipal information is sufficient. As much as 40% of the residents report getting a lot of information via the Internet.

From the beginning, Tampere has worked hard to combat the threatening urban digital divide. To build up its web-based communications and services, the municipality has arranged ICT training for citizens and established free Internet access points open to all. According to a survey carried out late in 2004, 80% of the residents of Tampere reported having access to the Internet. In the same survey 38% of respondents expressed that they feel a need for further training in the use of the Internet (Taloustutkimus 2004).

One of the most innovative attempts to bridge the digital divide is the bus called 'Netti-Nysse' in Finnish. It provides free Internet access and training on wheels, a 'netmobile' going to where the people are in suburbs and meeting places. Another specialty is 'Mukanetti', a training program for the elderly in computers and the Internet launched by the church and carried

out by peer teachers that even the shyest newbies feel comfortable approaching. A third important development is 'Mansetori', the neighborhood venue that trains people to generate their own content and maintain websites for their own neighborhood or group (Seppälä 2001).

Citizen influence and its limits

Focussing on the citizen is the guiding principle of Tampere's municipal e-services and e-democracy. The first website of the City of Tampere was little more than a tourist information package, but very soon the focus shifted from visitors to the local residents. User surveys and topics suggested by the citizens have been used to set up a user-oriented website and a real channel of feedback available 24 hours a day to every resident of Tampere. Questions are answered promptly and opinions are forwarded to the staff processing the issue in question.

The municipal budget has been one of the best venues for e-democracy. The residents' viewpoints have been heard before the council has set its own priorities. The results have been available at the final decision-making phase.

In town planning, the official commenting periods have been enhanced by the Internet and its potential of visualising the plans and enabling people to study various solutions comfortably at home. Comments are received by e-mail and recorded with due procedure. Even the dance pavilion that was voted the best suggestion of the initiatives collected via the Internet before the local election of 2000, as well as the results of the town planning game carried out in two neighborhoods, were included in the final consideration of the planning alternatives.

All participation and civic influence have their limits, though. In the end, the dance pavilion was not built, and many good ideas that the residents have come up with have never been implemented. In the representative democracy elected politicians

are responsible for the municipal affairs, for designing public policies, and for allocation of resources, and it is not possible to make every wish come true – not even in respect of the winning or the popular initiatives. As a matter of fact, the same applies sometimes even to the most influential politicians: they cannot dictate the municipal policies and decisions, but need to negotiate with other politicians and relevant stakeholders in order to find a kind of negotiated solution. This is due to the pluralist nature of local decision making in Finland. On the other hand, we should be able to challenge some of the premises of representative system of government. In this regard one of the most important issues is, should there be some arrangements to allow direct citizen involvement in decision-making as in the case of binding referendum (see Becker & Slaton 2000).

Does e-democracy make a difference?

e-Democracy is often criticised for being too ‘easy’ and promising more than it can keep. From the point of view of local government e-democracy is but one dimension of the functions and tasks of self-governing local community, subject to many other influences and demands with varying weight. On the other hand, democracy is an important building block of the legitimate system of local government, which affects the functioning of the system and the local condition much more than the apparent democratic processes themselves may make us believe. This is why we should continuously work for more democratic e-governance, as it is the way to match the requirements of transformational politics and policy to the emerging information society.

In its present form the representative e-democracy should be understood as a convenient tool to conduct polls and citizen consultation in the cases in which such an information on citizens preferences are needed. Within present system this is, however, only consultative, due to existing legislation. Yet, the

true potential of democratic e-governance is used when local democratic processes are taken to a higher level with organised deliberative and participatory processes and at some point of history, with more radical applications of direct democracy (On the rating of the level of e-democracy, see Becker 2001). This development has its preconditions. At the moment societal and local tendencies provide a mixed view of what will be the future direction in this respect. For example, there are demands of increasing direct democracy, such as binding referendums, but at the same time there is increased individualism and alienation, which seem to undermine the very idea of democratic governance.

According to a survey carried out in 2002, 36% of the residents of Tampere were interested in the participation opportunities provided by the municipal Internet services. Why is it then that the record rate of actual usage of these opportunities is around 1%? In addition to organised opportunity, access and sufficient skills, people need a motive to participate. As a source of motivation, technical novelties and gadgetry related to the Internet revolution have more or less been exhausted. People are more interested in – the method of participation notwithstanding – issues that are concrete and topical rather than those that are more abstract in nature and thus difficult to understand. Publicity in media outside the web site of the city government clearly increases participation. The possibly even more important factor of motivation, however, is the result of participation experienced in the past and its impact on the expectations attached to current or future policy and governance processes: if civic participation has made a difference at one point in time, it is easier to make people interested in participation at some later stage. Creation of such positive collective experiences seems to have had too modest a role in the development of e-democracy.

Even though the means and the methods are still developing, the Internet was no longer a novelty in the mid-2000s. Mobile phones could also be developed as a real voting instrument. At some point, digital television is going to open up new interactive channels. Anyhow, it has become clear by now that democracy is not and will never be about technology as such, but about rule by the people. From a practical e-government perspective this refers to e-enabled arrangements that make the democracy function better by providing sufficient information, organising consultative and deliberative processes, and connecting these to the actual decision-making processes in which the citizens have a say in the mix of direct, participatory, and representative models of democracy.

Conclusion

Tampere has shown a capacity for social innovation in the area of democratic e-governance. Since the mid-1990s it has systematically increased various forms and applications of e-democracy. The City of Tampere has been ranked high both in Finland and in Europe, for it scored the highest on Internet services among 34 Finnish cities in the Municipal Services 2001 Survey and number 13 in the European eCity Competition in 2002. It has been awarded for its innovative city planning game by the Finnish National Idea Award in 2001 and for its Internet Bus (Netti-Nysse) by the European Commission eGovernment Best Practice Award in the same year. The eCitizenship for All Award by Telecities was granted to the City of Tampere in 2003 for Participation Palette. Some evidence of the local stakeholders' perspectives is provided by surveys in which the overall ranking given by Internet users to the e-government services of the city has constantly been slightly over 8 on a scale 4–10, which is a fairly good result (Kuusisto 2002; Anttiroiko 2004b).

Even if Tampere has succeeded in increasing democratic aspects of e-governance, the overall transformation has been modest. The change has taken place especially in the interaction between the administrative machinery and active Internet users, be it that it is only initial step in the long process of democratising e-governance. It is fair to say that the Finnish system of local governance contains many conservative aspects due to its strong rooting in representative democracy. What remains a challenge in this respect is a tighter integration of e-enabled democratic practices to the decision making sphere of the city government. It is equally fair to say that the problem of democracy deficit in real life is not that big, due to the societal conditions of Finnish welfare society, which is based on the idea of transparency, universal welfare provision, and high-performing public administration.

Today, e-democracy is increasingly an inherent element of the structures and processes of municipal system. What is of utmost importance is that in the mid-2000s the entire approach to e-democracy and e-services has changed from what it was in the latter half of the 1990s. The enthusiasm of early experiments has made room for more cautious approaches which pay attention to critical mass (sufficient number of users for e-services and applications) and cost-efficiency. As a result, it is possible that the latter half of 2000s becomes a period of stagnation or at least slow development rather than acceleration in the development of democratic e-governance.

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