

Navigating Troubled Waters: Bringing the E-Democratic Ship into Safe Harbour?

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose – Whereas prior research has conceptualized and empirically investigated reinforcement and amplification mechanisms, this paper proposes a framework of power that captures the dynamic ways in which different forms of online political action is structured by disparate mechanisms.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper derives a theoretical model of power from Foucault and affiliated governmentality studies, which constructs power as the mechanisms and logics that structure the field of possible actions. This model is grounded in research literature on e-democracy and applied in a study of the mechanisms that structure e-democracy.

Findings – The paper identifies four mechanisms that balance disparate concerns of e-democracy. Monitoring (M) mechanisms apply logics of security and service to weigh anonymity and publicity against each other. The range of participants is determined by Inclusion/exclusion (I) mechanisms which operate through rules of engagement. Moderation (M) mechanisms balance concerns for heterogenous viewpoints and homogeneity according to a logic of uniformity. Logics of profit making and shared understanding warrant the balance that Exposure (E) mechanisms strike between information abundance and centralized access. The four mechanisms are combined in the MIME framework.

Research limitations/implications – The MIME framework includes mechanisms that are documented by the English speaking research community, often with a substantial time lag. Others and potentially forceful mechanisms might not be reported in the research literature.

Practical implications – Practitioners are encouraged to be cognizant of the variety of mechanisms that condition e-democracy; their internal components and external relations of e-democratic practices when designing, building, and conducting e-democratic initiatives.

Originality/value – Instead of focusing exclusively on the beneficiaries and the possible payoffs from e-democratic practices, the MIME framework developed in the paper focuses on the mechanisms which structure e-democracy.

Keywords:

e-democracy, power, governmentality, steering mechanisms

Article Classification:

Conceptual paper

Introduction

A broad range of studies suggests that the share of information and communication technologies (ICT) in political involvement is significant and that democratic governance is changing as a result. The changes include the rise of bottom-up flash and single-issue campaigning (Breindl, 2010); increased mobilization of otherwise silent voices (Vissers and Stolle, 2013); developments of political counter-discourses (Dahlberg, 2007); and the creation of a fifth estate (Dutton, 2013). The tactical employment of online channels could indeed change the conditions for political participation and reconfigure the relationships of power. Empirical evidence, however, suggests that despite two decades of online involvement and three to four decades of e-mail campaigning and tele-democracy radical shifts in power balances have yet to transpire.

While it has become significantly easier for most people to produce information, the sheer volume of user generated information necessitates structuring access points; as new avenues for political participation is enabled online, participation requires compliance with rules of conduct that are not formulated nor enforced by the participants; while the myth of anonymity invites Internet users to act and express themselves freely, monitoring measures are continuously deployed in the name of security; while deliberative forums provide stages for hitherto subdued voices, the plethora of voices is turned into a uniform account resembling that of the political, administrative, and technical elites.

In this paper, we propose a framework for studying and understanding power in relation to e-democracy. Drawing on a line of reasoning developed by Foucault and adapted by successive governmentality studies, we argue that power is an integrated dimension and source of dynamics in e-democracy and that attention needs to be directed at the mechanisms by which power is exerted. The paper, then, moves beyond discussions of beneficiaries and the magnitude of payoffs from e-democracy. Employing this line of reasoning, we explore four mechanisms - Monitoring, Inclusion/Exclusion, Moderation, Exposure (MIME) – that correspond with the contradictory trends noted above and which structure various incarnations of online political participation such as deliberation (Coleman, 2004), petitioning (Cruikshank and Smith, 2010), consultation (Coleman and Shane, 2012), and voting (Schaupp and Carter, 2005). The exploration of the mechanisms results in the MIME framework for understanding the conditions of possibilities for e-democracy.

First, we critically review the reinforcement and the amplification theses and propose in the subsequent section an alternative view of power, which interprets power as mechanisms that structure the field of possible actions. In the following section, we present the MIME framework, which summarises and combines these mechanisms. Each mechanism is elaborated on in the following section. We conclude the paper by comparing the MIME framework with the reinforcement thesis and the amplification thesis and discuss possible implications for theory and practice.

Online Political Participation and Power

The research literature on online democracy and power has been dominated by two major streams: The reinforcement thesis and the amplification thesis. The reinforcement thesis (Danziger *et al.*, 1982) states that traditional political and economic elites gain most from e-democratic developments. This view has been affirmed repeatedly by empirical research (Borge *et al.*, 2009; Carman, 2014; Coleman, 2004; Garrett and Jensen, 2011; Price, 2012; Nielsen *et al.*, 2015). The amplification thesis (Agre, 2002) suggests that the Internet amplifies existing forces and that power struggles intensify online. While the amplification thesis is affirmed across the board it primarily finds empirical evidence from social movements, political activism, and alternative non-institutional forms of political engagement (Bakardjieva, 2009; Bennett, 2003; Toyama, 2011). The reinforcement and amplification theses both contradict the Utopian hope that the Internet per se will level power relations and improve the conditions for political participation. What is more important,

they also conceptualise power as an obtainable and tangible asset, something which is possible to possess more or less of.

It is, however, difficult to imagine power as a resource akin to, for example, money, tradable goods, and Internet access (Foucault, 1982; Young, 2011). One's share of such goods may condition one's possibilities of exercising power, but power is not to be likened with these goods. Likewise, while one's social position may hinder or further the exertion of power, power is not a social position. Thus, while power is contingent upon one's resources and social position, power is something else. If power was a resource or a position it appears that the only thing that would hinder an equal share of power would be the unwillingness of those in power to share their resources or their positions. In the literature on e-democracy, however, there are abundant well-intended initiatives in which the political elites invite those less fortunate to participate but where the desired effects are not achieved. If we interpret power in terms of resources we would have difficulty in explaining that the desired effects fail to materialize, which suggests that we are in need of another concept of power and another approach to exploring power.

Foucault (1980) suggests that we cut off the King's head in political theory by discarding our perception of power as a resource pertaining to the person or the position of the King or the State. Rather than viewing power as a resource or a position, as something obtainable or tradable, Foucault (1982) suggests that power is exerted through the wealth of actions that structure the field of possible actions. Somewhat less abstract, power is the attempt to steer, direct, or shape behaviour according to particular sets of logics through the employment of diverse techniques and mechanisms (Dean, 2010; Rose, 1999). Power does not designate any specific logic or any specific way of steering, directing, or shaping behaviour but the very relationship between logics and structuring mechanisms. The logic of sovereign-subject relations, for example, makes possible the sovereign's punishment of the subjects on the scaffold and affirms thereby the might of the sovereign. Likewise, surveillance mechanisms such as Bentham's Panopticon (Foucault, 1991) or enacted online (Andrejevic, 2007) – make us discipline ourselves. Behaviour is structured by less spectacular mechanisms still. The city plan of Nantes, for example, directs the flow of populations, goods, diseases in a way that adheres to the welfare of the general populace (Foucault, 2007). The relational logic of power is illustrated in Figure 1. Mechanisms structure the field of possible actions rather than determining the concrete actions themselves. This is illustrated by the dotted arrow from "Mechanism" to "Possible actions". The mechanism adheres to and is warranted by an underlying logic, which in turn is affirmed through the deployment of the mechanism. This is illustrated by the curly bracket.

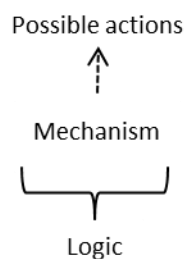


Figure 1 Theoretically derived model of power

Power is enacted through a broad repertoire of mechanisms that operate across the entire social field (Dahlstedt, 2009) and e-democracy is no exception. E-democracy designates the field of possible online democratic actions. It is the sum of different incarnations of online political participation such as deliberation, voting, petitioning and consulting. Correspondingly, we expect e-democracy to be structured by a diverse and multifaceted set of mechanisms, which are manifest in concrete interfaces, designs, and

codes of conduct. The mechanisms, to be clear, condition the possibilities for action and attest to their justificatory logics.

Method

The analysis consists of two steps: First the theoretically derived model of power is adjusted to the field of e-democracy. This is accomplished by grounding the model in literature on e-democracy. Second, the adjusted model is applied to the very same body of literature. The purpose is to capture each mechanism that structures concrete instances of online political participation. In the next section, we will outline briefly how we have employed the research literature from which this dual analysis is drawn.

Fortified by the online availability of research in databases as ProQuest, Web of Knowledge, and Google Scholar, the “interim struggle” (Weick, 1995) to establish the research theoretical background has in our work been aided by the classic work on the grounding theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) attempting to contribute to substantive and longer term formal theorizing. In this paper we attempt to ground the model of power as it is derived from Foucault and governmentality studies and enhance the existing knowledge of power (the amplification and reinforcement theses) through the study of scientific literature on e-democracy. In other literature reviews of ICT in the political arena (Andersen *et al.*, 2010) we have used Webster and Watson’s (2002) concept-categorization to enrich and advance the categories of impacts of IT on the political world.

We focused on peer-reviewed research papers containing ‘eDemocracy’, ‘e-democracy’, ‘electronic democracy’, ‘digital democracy’, ‘online democracy’, ‘Internet democracy’ or ‘cyber democracy’ in the title of the paper. Using these keywords, we identified 45 papers through Web of Knowledge and ProQuest. During re-iterative interpretations and discussions of this literature the model of power derived from Foucault and governmentality studies proved itself more capable of accounting for how power operates within e-democracy than the reinforcement and the amplification theses. With the theoretical model in place, we identified and distilled four distinct mechanisms within this body of literature: 1) monitoring, 2) inclusion/exclusion, 3) moderation, and 4) exposure. A second round of literature search and analysis was conducted focusing solely on the four mechanisms. Relevant references within the initial publications were traced and the aforementioned databases and key journals were investigated. The total body of literature then reached 113 papers. Next, we grounded the theoretically derived model in the literature on e-democracy. During the second round of interpretations and discussions of how the model fitted with the literature in question we adjusted the model by conceptualizing mechanisms as a slider between opposing concerns. In the subsequent sections we present the grounded model of power and MIME framework that emerged from these re-iterative analytical steps.

Adjusted Model of Power

The mechanisms that conditions e-democracy tend to rest upon and strike a balance between opposing concerns in accordance with a specific underlying logic that does not necessarily derive strictly speaking from democratic concerns. A brief example illustrates these points. Conglomerates like Google and Apple, for example, employ exposure techniques to direct our online movements in accordance with their interest of keeping us within their reach, collect our data, expose us to individually tailored advertisements, and thereby reaping profits (Dahlberg, 2005; Patelis, 2000). These businesses face the challenge of providing relevant information but also keep users within reach. The conflicting concerns, the balance between, and the mechanisms employed to strike this balance are warranted by the underlying logic of profitmaking. The access to the internet and the amount of political information is distributed and consumed mainly along commercial channels and as such conditioned by market logics.

We adjust the model displayed in Figure 1 accordingly (see Figure 2): The relations between logic, mechanism and possible actions remain the same as in Figure 1. Thus, possible actions are structured by mechanisms, which are contained by specific logics. The level of “Mechanisms”, however, are expanded to illustrate that mechanisms function as a slider (the triangle) that strikes a balance between opposing concerns (in the model merely labelled concern A and B).

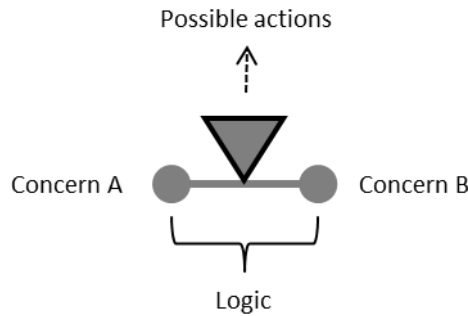


Figure 2 Adjusted model of power

The MIME Framework

The analysis’ second objective is to identify the *general* set of mechanisms that structure concrete instances of online political participation. This implies that our analysis and report of the findings is at a more abstract level as compared to studies that have specific lenses as deployed by for example Boyle’s (1997) study on encryption technologies, Henman’s (2013) study on government 2.0 discourses, Lyon’s (1998) research on surveillance mechanisms in the form of cookies and spiders, Green’s (1999) identification of mechanisms of power in commercial and workplace surveillance, and Fuchs’s (2013) study of Deep Packet Inspection surveillance technologies.

We have identified four mechanisms that span conflicting objectives and are dynamic arenas for an extensive exercising of power. The mechanisms are combined in the MIME framework (Figure 3).

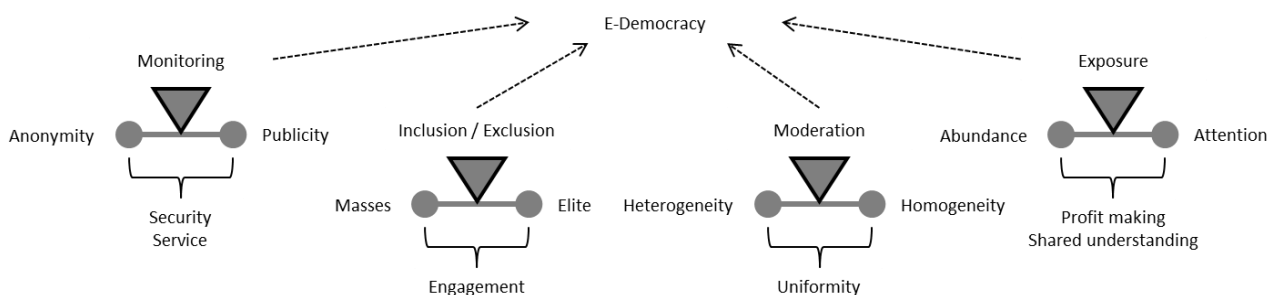


Figure 3 The MIME framework

Monitoring mechanisms are concerned with security and service provision and embed ideals of anonymity and publicity according to these concerns. Inclusion/exclusion mechanisms enforce rules of conduct. Moderation mechanisms are concerned with uniformity and strike a balance between the desire to involve heterogenic viewpoints and a wish for homogeneity. Finally, exposure mechanisms embed user generated information and central access points according to a logic of profit making and a concern for shared understanding.

Attention to each of these mechanisms and the interplay between them is the key to understanding the evolution of e-democracy. Based on the work on centralization-decentralization of IT-systems by King (1978), the conditions of possibilities for online political participation swing back and forth as a pendulum of change between masses and the elite, production and attention, heterogeneity and homogeneity, and anonymity and publicity. The combinatorial and dynamic nature of the MIME framework enables us to obtain a multifaceted grasp of the structure of online political participation. Attempts to describe the structure as static will not only be erroneous but also be counterproductive in understanding e-democratic power. In the subsequent section we will expand on each of the structuring mechanisms.

Monitoring Mechanisms

Anonymity is a key component of e-democracy. If social, racial, and economic cues are hidden, political interaction might be more effective. However, while such cues are blurred online, history has shown that actual anonymity is a myth. Sites well-known for embracing anonymity include Threema and 4chan. 'What's unique about [4chan] is that it is anonymous, it has no memory, no archives, no registration' (Poole, 2010). Despite this, authorities have on two occasions been able to identify and arrest 4chan users, whose Internet protocol addresses were captured by 4chan and provided to the authorities (Cassidy, 2013; The Smoking Gun, 2011).

Concern for anonymity is weighed against that of publicity by monitoring mechanisms according to a logic of security. Arguably, the extensive surveillance programs of the National Security Agency are the most well-known examples of monitoring presently. But minor and less popular examples proliferate. In the light of the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo in January 2015, the French Parliament voted in April 2015 for a bill proposing extended surveillance measures under the pretext of security (Woods, 2015), thus forcing Internet service providers to automatically monitor their customers' online activities and make their data freely available to intelligence services (Toor, 2015).

Monitoring mechanisms are also employed in order to tailor services according to citizens' needs (Gunter, 2006, Lips *et al.*, 2009). In order to provide individually tailored services the service provider needs to have detailed knowledge about the service consumer. The better tailored a service, the more knowledge about the user is required. At a somewhat speculative level, Meijer (2012) argues that big data on diverse issues such as pollution and education could diminish the need for citizen engagement. The core of Meijer's concern is not so much that an all-knowing government needs citizens for providing information. Obviously, they do. The tricky question is whether citizens need to provide that information knowingly or not.

Citizens, NGOs and journalists equally use online techniques to monitor legislators' and private enterprises' activities (Dahlberg, 2005; Dutton, 2013). The risk of being caught in manipulation or surveillance is a constant threat which paradoxically might counter these activities (Rosa, 2013; van den Hoven, 2005). Online, monitoring has become a common way of structuring action.

Inclusion/Exclusion Mechanisms

While the online geography of access is reconfigured and includes a wider group of people (Chadwick, 2006), political participation presupposes compliance with the rules of conduct; compliance or exclusion. Thus, rules of engagement translate into inclusion / exclusion mechanism which structure online political participation (Macintosh, 2004; Morison, 2010).

The US petition website, *We the People*, serves as an example of inclusion/exclusion mechanisms characteristic of websites that support mass-collaboration or mass-interaction (for similar examples see betrirejvavik.is and epetitionen.bundestag.de). At *We the People* the potential participant base is extensive. In order to create or sign petitions you need to be at least thirteen years of age and provide a

name and a valid email address. Nowhere is it stated that you need to be a US citizen. Thus, 13-year old Pakistanis can participate on an equal basis with East Hampton residents. Participation, however, is severely constrained by design and the rules of conduct. The design incites users to find, sign, and create petitions. It discourages deliberation and group formation along with a wide range of other activities. Activities are further restrained by rules of conduct according to which you are, among others, not allowed to post anything obscene, vulgar, or lewd. Obscenity, vulgarity, and lewdness, however, are open to interpretation, and it is not clear when any posting is inappropriate. What is clear is that it is the White House staff that judge and execute the penalty. If the White House reasonably believes that one does not comply with the rules of conduct it may 'disable [his/her] accounts, remove associated signatures and remove petitions created or signed by [the user]' (The White House, 2014).

The intangibility of the inclusion/exclusion mechanisms renders them all the more efficient. While it is significantly easier to include people, exclusion potentially entails more than being left out of future participation. Exclusion from *We the People* means that your online alias ceases to exist (your account is disabled) and that your prior actions never transpired (signatures and petitions created or signed by you are removed).

Moderation Mechanisms

The third mechanism structures the process by which heterogenic groups and interests reach agreement through cooperation according to a logic of uniformity. This is especially significant with regard to deliberative participation. Deliberation is different from consultation, petitioning and voting, because it forms rather than affirms preferences (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). While citizens value the opportunity to express themselves, traditional elites value the opportunity to hear otherwise subdued or excluded voices. Insofar as opinions change during deliberation processes, it is, however, primarily citizens' opinions that change into those of the elite (Price, 2012). The changes of opinion cannot be explained by elite persuasion as it also occurs in groups without any elite members. Deliberation, then, does not challenge but reconfirms the elite discourses and opinions. Does this mean that people arrive at better opinions through deliberation and that these opinions happen to coincide with those of the elite? We feel sceptical of such a conclusion because it ignores the diverse processes by which people come to hold certain opinions outside of or prior to the controlled deliberation processes.

At a general level, the deliberative democratic theory has been criticized for being elitist (Przeworski, 1998; Rättala, 2000) and homogenizing (Dahlberg, 2007). If deliberation does not produce homogeneity, the participating citizens will most likely be met with no reaction from politicians who deem the quality of online discussions too insignificant to have a serious impact (Hedde and Svensson, 2009). These general observations might explain preference formations in deliberative settings with ordinary and elite members. However, they do not apply to settings with no elite members. In order to shed light on the workings of such settings, we need to focus on concrete moderation mechanisms. The crucial point, here, is how the online deliberative environment is designed, structured, and controlled (Coleman, 2004; Wright and Street, 2007). These and similar mechanisms have profound impact on the outcome of deliberative sessions. However, they remain understudied (Price, 2012).

Exposure Mechanisms

The fourth mechanism maintains a balance between widespread opportunities to produce information and central access points to this user generated information. The underlying logics are profit making and shared understanding. The balance obtained by exposure mechanisms has become especially significant with the rise of Web 2.0 technologies and social media, which have made it significantly easier for both citizens and political elites to produce content and to magnify voice (Dahlberg, 2005; Rosa, 2013). The potentials for production and outreach are enormous. As of June 2013 there were 1.15 billion Facebook users that on

average daily shared 4.75 billion status updates, wall posts, photos, videos and comments (Facebook, Ericsson and Qualcomm, 2013). Facebook statistics indicate that only a minor portion of this content is of any political significance. This does not change the fact, however, that political actors have experienced an escalation of voice platforms and that these platforms have been employed to increase the frequency of voice. The wealth of information, however, makes means of exposure or attention all the more important (Hargittai, 2004). As Dahlberg (2005) argues: 'The problem of vast attention inequalities between publications is masked by abundance'.

Evidence suggests that popular search engines and large corporations effectively structure and limit users' access to information (Patelis, 2000). AOL and Google, for example, have created massive one-stop shops. The wealth of opportunities, email accounts, newsfeeds, calendars, social networks and shops, offered by such entry sites make it nearly unnecessary for users to ever leave these domains. In addition, their search engines give primacy to sites hosted by their own domains to ensure that users do not leave.

Citizen generated voice, then, is of significant importance. However, the mere wealth of voices necessitates entry points that make order out of chaos. Currently, such structuring points are controlled by massive industries rather than the political actors themselves.

Discussion

The MIME framework views power as a set of structured actions and thereby brings attention to which and how concrete power mechanisms structure the range of possible democratic actions online. The emerging picture thereby moves beyond the reinforcement and amplification theses. It sees power as an integral part of e-democracy. Mass-collaboration requires some agreement as to how we are to work together formally as expressed in rules of conduct. Everybody spies on everybody in order to counteract or disclose presumed anonymous actions that are deemed harmful. Deliberation requires an agenda, a topic to be debated, as well as information, and moderation, all of which condition the deliberative outcomes. The wealth of user generated information necessitates structuring of entry points, to the effect that much information goes unnoticed.

Foucault has been criticised because it is impossible to raise a criticism of power from his conceptualization. The internal logic of the relations between the elements of the model cannot be tampered with. We can change each element, but the field of possible actions will still be structured according to some logic. No emancipation is possible. This does not mean, however, that criticism and change are not possible. Thus we can disagree with and change the balance made, we can disagree with the fairness or the reasonableness of the underlying logic and replace it with something else. We can ask, for example, if we find it justifiable that market logics condition online political participation. The aim is to open up a space for critical thought (Rose, 1999) and create a fuller and more nuanced picture of e-democracy; to show that participation does not delimit, equalize, or eliminate power relations; that e-democracy implies the exercise of power. This does not change even though the tables are turned by technological means.

Due to our literature search strategy, the list of mechanisms identified is not exhaustive. Only publications in English were included, which is a particularly pressing issue, since we are addressing a phenomenon that stretches well beyond the English speaking world. In addition, other search parameters or other databases would have resulted in another potentially larger body of literature in which it would be possible to identify other mechanisms. The function of coding, for example, is not present in our analysis even though it has become subject of critical and systematic academic scrutiny (see the list of research literature created and maintained by Gillespie and Seaver). Furthermore, as mechanisms are located in research publications, possible findings are limited to mechanisms that have been treated with different approaches by the academia. Finally, as new e-democratic avenues evolve, new mechanisms are deployed. We posit,

therefore, that additional mechanisms contribute to the structuring of e-democratic possibilities and that the MIME framework remains open-ended.

Conclusion & Policy Implications

Inspired by Foucault and governmentality studies, this paper views power as an integrated part of e-democracy and direct the analytical attention towards the mechanisms by which power is exerted. Based on an extensive literature review, four mechanisms were located: monitoring, inclusion/exclusion, moderation, and exposure. In practice, e-democratic initiatives need to strike some balance between: 1) anonymity, security, and individuality; 2) the inclusion of multitudes and ordered collaboration; 3) heterogeneous viewpoints and single societal means and ends; and between 4) the production of and the access to information. However, different initiatives affect these balances differently, and consequently, condition the possible range of democratic actions. *We the People*, for example, ensures anonymity, includes a broad segment of the population, hardly moderates collaboration, and serves as a central access point to create petitions. By comparison, in order to participate at *kansalaisaloite.fi* (the Finnish equivalent to *We the People*) one needs to sign in with one's personal online banking password. Thus, anonymity yields to individuality and security. In addition, it is ensured that only eligible voters are included. Furthermore, significant moderation is offered by the NGO, Open Ministry, which advises campaigners on how to create viable legislative ideas and run effective campaigns (Heikka, 2015). Finally, access to the citizens' initiatives is provided by the site itself.

In the title of this paper we included the phrase *navigating troubled waters* to signal that introducing digital technologies in democratic processes is loaded with dilemmas and strong effects. The MIME framework helps in mapping them and the steps by which they are navigated. In addition, we can identify a new class of professionals with a profound impact on how the troubled waters are traversed. Among others, there is need for deliberation moderators, designers, and programmers. Among these, programming seems to be the most fundamental skill. In a sense, programming unites all previous skills into one. We encourage practitioners as well as scholars to be attentive to these skills and the concrete mechanisms that are produced and reproduced through the online environments designed for political participation. Acknowledging that no actors or institutions is in full control of the mechanisms and the logics that warrants specific designs, future studies of how the design of e-democracy prescribes specific political engagement may find theoretical guidance in the concepts of inscription (Akrich, 1992) configurations (Rose and Blume, 2003).

The MIME framework is useful for public and governmental policy making in two important aspects. Firstly, by being attuned to the variety of mechanisms that condition e-democracy, legitimacy and transparency can be enhanced. By paying attention to the internal components and external relations of e-democratic practices, the dilemmas e-democracy face in practice are disclosed and actions towards their solutions improved. Secondly, the MIME framework has a more actionable implication inviting government and semi-government organizations to map current practices and pro-active actions. We work with non-profit semi-governmental organization and various levels of government when we use the four steering mechanisms to spearhead the debate and guide possible actions.

Failure to pay attention to the mechanisms highlighted in the MIME framework and leaving the course of actions purely to the global technology players as well as market mechanisms might push the ship of e-democracy to a different direction where the nature of politics and involvement of citizens will be radically different and have less general legitimacy. In turn, this could lead to the destabilization of government.

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