Digital Democracy:
Ideas, Intentions and Initiatives
in Swedish Local Governments

Joachim Åström
Department of Social Science
Örebro University
701 82 Örebro
Sweden
+46 19 30 39 63
joakim.astrom@sam.oru.se

Prepared for presentation at the ECPR joint session of workshops,
Grenoble, April 6-11 2001
Introduction

It has commonly been suggested that the public in postindustrial societies has become increasingly disenchanted with the traditional institutions of representative government, detached from political parties, and disillusioned with older forms of participatory activity. The political parties – since long the most important intermediary link between the people and the centre of power – seem to have lost their hold on the voters. Fewer voters are able to identify with a single party, the voting behaviour becomes more and more flexible and the number of party-members decrease (Gidlund & Möller, 1999). In addition to this, there is an increase in the general distrust felt towards parties and politicians. Field surveys indicate that confidence in politicians and parties, during the last decades, has been undermined in almost all countries where time series surveys have been conducted (Norris, 1999). In Sweden, formal studies are available since the 1960s, and they all indicate that confidence in the politicians has been undermined, slowly but constantly (Holmberg, 1999). According to the critics, this development has gone so far that the traditional institutions of parties and representative governments need to be thoroughly strengthened, or abandoned (Petersson and others, 2000).

In later years, new information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been put forward as a solution to these problems. According to Gibson and Ward (1998), the Internet has a potential to increase internal party democracy and intensify interparty competition. Hague and Loader (1999) suggest that ICTs could potentially promote government accountability, create a better informed citizenry, and facilitate public deliberation and participation in the decision-making process in state and civil society. Budge (1996) believes that the development of the Internet, for the first time, make direct democracy feasible in a mass society. In many different ways then, the Internet offers opportunities to reconnect people to the political process, by reinventing the old electoral chain of command, or by developing a more participatory democracy.

Will hopes for a digital democracy be realised? In Sweden there is a fairly good chance for this to happen. The fast expansion of the Internet, combined with the ongoing broadband expansion, imply that a technological platform now exists in order to develop applications which in different ways are considered to strengthen democracy. According to statistics during the second half of the year 2000, 76 percent of the Swedish population between 16 and 79 years of age had access to a computer at home, and 65 percent had access to the Internet at
home (SCB, 2001). Even though the Internet is still not very much used in a political context (SOU 2000:1), a recent survey showed that every third Internet user visited their local government web site at least once during the last month (Kommunaktuellt 2001, nr 1). These are figures that, during that period of time, none of the commercial Internet portals could match up to. This implies that there is a growing interest in public issues on the Net, as well as an increasing group of potential participants for online democracy.

This progress has also inspired a commercial business development. During the last year, at least four ICT-companies (Entrappa Public, Municel, Vivarto and Votia Empowerment) have been launched in Sweden in order to deal with democracy issues in different ways. Several other companies within the ICT sector are also developing similar approaches as a part of their other business. For those municipalities which decide to initiate an attempt to a digital democracy, these companies offer consultant services, software and technical support. This may be important to small organisations which lack technical competence and resources of their own.

Still, changes in political behaviour are far from certain. Technological change must be translated into political change through decisions made by the members affected. They must decide whether they want to adapt to a new communications environment, and in what ways (Zittel, 1999). This paper examines the relationship between ideas, intentions and initiatives in the process of wiring Swedish local governments. The first part of the paper reviews the normative theoretical argument in favour of digital democracy, while the second draws on evidence from a survey examining how local politicians in Sweden relate to these new ideas. Do they believe in the use of the Internet in the political process? Are some opportunities via the Net more supported than others? The third part of the paper, moving from formal norms to active norms, focuses on the role and function of local government web sites. How far do these sites provide comprehensive information and opportunities for interactive communication? What factors help to explain the patterns that we find? The conclusion summarises the core findings and considers some implications for understanding the role of the Internet in a Swedish context.
Theories of digital democracy

The concept of digital democracy is quite often presented as a program for democratic reform. Some proponents of digital democracy recommend the possibility to strengthen the core institutions of representative democracy through dissemination of information and transparency. Others focus the potential to strengthen civic engagement and political activism through online discussion and deliberation. A third line of argument recommends citizens direct participation in political decision making. These programs are, however, grounded in different notions of democracy and connect different democratic values to technological change. The aim of this part is to construct a set of models that capture these discourses. The brief discussion here, of course, does not attempt to cover every aspect of the debate, but will hopefully function as a framework for the empirical parts later on.

Direct democracy

One common point of view in the debate on digital democracy is the recommendation of citizens' direct participation in political decision making. In this argument, all citizens are assumed to have at least the same amount of wisdom as the elite. Thus it is of utmost importance that the will of the majority is allowed to directly influence decisions in all areas of society. Representation is seen as a practical necessity in some situations, but is generally regarded as a necessary evil that could and should be avoided in different ways (Premfors, 2000).

Use of information and communication technologies (ICT) is seen as one such way. The core of the direct democratic claim rests on the idea that communication capacity is a kind of rate-limiting factor in political engagement and influence. At present, political professionals, interest groups, and other elites dominate the comparatively limited resources for effective political communication. The Net can decentralise access to communication and information, increasing citizen’s political resources. As a consequence individuals engagement in politics will increase, as will their influence. In this vision not only will a mass audience be able to follow politics and express its views to government, but it will also be fundamentally less dependent on linkage organisations and group politics (Bimber, 1998).

The more radical proponents of this model see ICT as the decisive means by which direct democracy Athenian style can be implemented in today's society. In their proposed model professional politicians and political parties become more or less redundant. Instead a new
kind of public rule will emerge. Through computer networks, individuals' views and opinions can be solicited, registered, stored, and communicated, so direct democracy can be implemented not only at a local level but nationally and even internationally. Representative democracy is then substituted by independent cyber citizens who act in a responsible manner at the electronic agora, without any professional politician acting as an intermediary and guardian (Ilshammar, 1997).

Less radical proponents do not want to abolish the representative system altogether, but combine it - "revitalise it" - with direct elements. In Budges (1996) vision there would still be a party-based government, chosen by elections. This government would put important bills and other political decisions to popular votes, just as it does with legislative votes under representative democracy. The function of the Net is to facilitate this running public referenda. Another possibility often refered to is a more frequent use of advisory opinion polls, by way of new technology, making sure that the parliament really knows what the people want. McLean (1989), for example, argues that the new media can do much to make governments more responsive to the wishes of the public by linking members more closely to their constituents.

Interactive democracy
While the most important participatory activity in the direct model of democracy is tied to the moment of casting a vote into the ballot box, interactive democracy pay more attention to public debate as a political tool. An interactive democracy can be described as a group of citizens whose matters of common concern are dealt with through ongoing discussions, debates and deliberations. The great value of the discussion is due to the fact that one believes that people let themselves be convinced by rational argumentation. The primary driving force of humans is personal autonomy, i.e. a strife to realise the projects they rate the highest, but the individuals’ perceived interests and wishes are decided in the dialectic process which the social interaction constitutes. The source of legitimacy is, consequently, not the predetermined will of individuals, but rather the process of its formation, that is, deliberation (Elster, 1998; Barber, 1984; Bohman, 1996).

Just as direct democracy, interactive democracy wants and indeed requires active citizens. Real democracy is realized only to the extent that ordinary people are given opportunities to carry on a dialogue, and act on, matters of common interest. Unlike direct democracy who
wants to increase the speed of the decision making process, interactive democracy wants to slow them down by involving people in discussion and deliberation processes. It is an illusion, they say, to believe that qualified standpoints in complex societal issues automatically are “out there” and easily can be caught in polls or referendums in accordance with the principle of majority (Fishkin, 1991). Participation is seen not only as a means to giving people power, but also to providing education and an opportunity to develop an opinion among fellow citizens. While previously almost solely focusing on making the representative system more representative by active dialogue between politicians and citizens, today much attention is paid to the benefits of horizontal communication among citizens: when people discuss societal issues, a platform is created for respect, confidence, tolerance and openness, crucial ingredients of an interactive democracy (Friedland, 1996). Following this line of reasoning, Barber (1984) recommends that the capabilities of the new technology should be used to strengthen civic education, guarantee equal access to information, and tie individuals and institutions into networks that will make real participatory discussion and debate possible.

In practice, this kind of interactivity could be facilitated in many different ways. Schuler (1996) stresses in particular the possibility to create interactive information systems which support information exchange and communication within a geographically defined area, known as Community Networks. Others emphasise the possibility for communication within groups that need to bridge geographical distances, e.g. parties and interest organisations (Gibson & Ward, 1998). A third group of authors stress the possibility to use ICTs in deliberative processes among a representative sample of citizens (Dahl, 1989; Etzioni, 1972).

**Indirect democracy**

In the model of indirect democracy it is just the members of the political elite who fully participate in the political process. This is because the ordinary citizen is considered not being that interested in politics or for that matter qualified to participate. Instead, the basic idea is having several elites competing for the citizens' votes. Elections are about choosing leaders based on a general account of the programs these represent. The elites must then have a sufficient room to manoeuvre, to revise and detail their political programs. The ground for legitimacy is the accountability of the elites - that the public in free elections can tell who they want to govern their common affairs (Schumpeter 1976).
The new technology is not seriously considered to be able to have an influence on the characteristics which make the representative system the best solution; the citizens will not be any wiser, nor less partial or more willing to really get into political issues (Sartori, 1987). Instead, the democratising potential of the new technology is regarded as being related to the politicians’ possibilities to spread information and gather support. The display of politics in the media is sometimes said to have caused a crisis in the political communication (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995) and is often stated as the main reason for the growing distrust of the politicians (Möller, 2000). Today, the politicians are given an opportunity to communicate directly with the citizens without interference from the media. In this way, the Internet might make it easier for the representatives to justify their policy, with a restored confidence as a result.

When it comes to the technical development, there are also hopes that the citizens, more easily, will be able to make their electoral choices and predict the consequences of casting their ballot. Government web sites can provide particularly effective mechanisms for providing the public with detailed and comprehensive information about the legislative procedures and activities, allowing public scrutiny of the policy process, and promoting the accountability of elected members to their constituents (Norris, 2000a). Moreover, the new technology is believed to have an equalising effect on parties, and intensify interparty competition. Since the cost of starting a home page is quite low, small as well as large parties can be given the opportunity to spread their messages and introduce themselves to the voters (Gibson & Ward, 1998). The competition strengthens the indirect democracy since it forces the parties to produce products that the citizens really want.

Table 1: Three models of digital democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Direct democracy</th>
<th>Interactive democracy</th>
<th>Indirect democracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aim</strong></td>
<td>Sovereignty/equality</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Individual freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ground for legitimacy</strong></td>
<td>Principle of majority</td>
<td>Public debate</td>
<td>Accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citizens’ role</strong></td>
<td>Decision maker</td>
<td>Opinion former</td>
<td>Voter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mandate of the elected</strong></td>
<td>Bound</td>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ICT use focusing</strong></td>
<td>Decisions</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Attitudes towards digital democracy

The significance of ICTs for democracy is, so far, discussed from a theoretical perspective. The question to be addressed in this section is how local policymakers relate to these new ideas. To influence policy choices, ideas must reach and convince decision-makers whose roles include evaluating the overall goals and tools of policy, initiating policy change, and overseeing implementations of new policies. It is time to examine (1) whether Swedish politicians in general are optimistic or pessimistic about the democratic potential of the Internet, and (2) which opportunities via the Internet that they find attractive. The data is based upon a survey-questionnaire sent to the Swedish chairmen of the municipal executive boards. The survey, conducted during the spring of 2000, was returned by 80 percent of the 289 chairmen.

Cyberoptimism or pessimism?

Historically, the debate on digital democracy has been a lively one, altering between ominous pessimism and exuberant optimism. Cyberoptimists, as we have seen, express hopes that the Internet may provide new opportunities for democracy as governments go online, facilitating communications between citizens and the state. Cyberpessimists are more sceptical, suggesting that new technology cannot be expected to transform existing power structures, make political decision-making more transparent or revive public participation. The first question aims at positioning the Swedish politicians along this optimism - pessimism continuum. How do they view the democratic potential of the Internet and other computer networks?

Table 2. The politicians’ views on the democratic potential of ICTs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Nr of politicians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New ICTs have a potential to enhance the quality of local democracy even at this time</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New ICTs are important new mediums that can enhance the quality of local democracy in the long run</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New ICTs can enhance the quality of local democracy to some extent, but its alleged significance is exaggerated</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New ICTs will not have any real significance for the quality of local democracy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The conclusion to be drawn from the Table, is that there is a general positive opinion about the democratic potential of ICTs among the Swedish chairmen of municipal executive boards. More than 80 per cent of the respondents agree that the technology has a potential to enhance the quality of democracy today or in the future. But even if the majority of the politicians seems to be optimistic about the possibilities of the new technology, this does not necessarily mean that they are prepared to experiment with digital democracy. Concerns are often expressed about the gap between technology haves and have-nots (the so-called "digital divide"), and that digital democracy will exacerbate inequalities among citizens. Tambini (1998) distinguishes two fundamentally different attitudes towards this problem: a conservative and a radical. The conservative attitude implies that key functions in the democratic process are kept offline in order not to treat persons with no access to the new technology unfairly. Following this line of reasoning the Internet will not be allowed any greater importance until it is made available for everyone on the same conditions. The alternative, the radical solution, implies that you try to keep everything online whether everybody has access to the medium or not. Democratisation for a few are considered better than no democratisation at all. What are the Swedish politicians’ attitudes towards this dilemma – are they radical or conservative?

Table 3. Does unequal access among citizens give cause for a limited use of ICTs in the democratic process?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Nr of politicians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree completely</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basically agree</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basically disagree</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree completely</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>99</strong></td>
<td><strong>221</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In previous studies it has been shown that there is a strong awareness of the limited nature of the audience among politicians. Many politicians interviewed refer directly to the unrepresentative nature of the socio-economic profiles of Internet users, frequently noting the inequalities involved in giving undue weight to the information haves, at the expense of those without the means to access technology (Magarey, 1999; Åström, 1999; Gidlund & Möller, 1999). In the light of these studies, the figures in Table 3 are a little bit surprising. The Table says that almost 50 per cent of the Swedish chairmen of the municipal executive boards do
not think that unequal access among citizens give cause for a limited use of ICTs in the democratic process. Of course, this radical view given expression to might be a reflection of the rapid diffusion of computers and the Internet among citizens; as the electorates constituents are relying more heavily on Internet communications, it becomes more and more difficult for politicians not to use the Internet themselves. But the result also indicates that we are brought up against different interpretations of the potential of the Net to create political equality. For those who consider the activity on the Net to be a complementary addition to other political activities, that gives former peripheral groups access to information and political arenas, the technology does not need to be generally available in order for the political landscape to be levelled out. For those who believe that the activities on the Net threatens to further widen the existing gaps in society, the technology should be available to everyone in order to experiment with digital democracy.

Following this line of reasoning, we could distinguish between politicians who affiliate with the *mobilisation perspective* within the litterature and those who affiliate with the *reinforcement perspective* (see Norris, 2000b; Bellamy & Taylor, 1998). The concept of mobilisation is based upon the assumption that the activity on the Net represents a distinct form of political participation, which in several ways differ from conventional activities, such as working in political parties or lobbying against elected representatives. By facilitating participation and increasing the availability of political information, the Net is considered to be able to reduce the imbalance of public social life. From the more sceptical reinforcement perspective, technology is considered to be shaped by the already influential, why it also becomes a tool in the process by which power structures are reinforced. This means that the social imbalance one can find in traditional political activities will be found on the Net as well.

In order to be able to judge which interpretation is the most probable, we need to study the citizens´ Internet usage at a micro level, which not will be dealt with in this paper. Here, we will simply make the assumption that the politicians´ interpretations of the democratic potential and ability of the technology to create political equality, probably is of importance when it comes to their will to experiment with new methods and techniques based on ICTs. A pessimistic interpretation of the technology in combination with a reinforcement perspective, would, if we are right, result in a lack of interest and a limited use of it, while a general optimism combined with a mobilisation perspective would result in commitment and active
intitiatives. If we put these two issues in relation to one another, we can thus create four categories of politicians who we have different expectations of: radical optimists, conservative optimists, radical pessimists and conservative pessimists. The pessimists, as we can see in the Table below, clearly belongs in the reinforcement camp, while the optimists are split in two relatively equal groups. Also, it becomes evident that the radical optimists constitute the largest category.

**Table 4. Four categories of politicians, percentage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mobilisation</th>
<th>Reinforcement</th>
<th>Total of percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cyberoptimism</td>
<td>&quot;Radical optimists&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Conservative optimists&quot;</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyberpessimism</td>
<td>&quot;Radical pessimists&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Conservative pessimists&quot;</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of percentage</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Direct, interactive or indirect democracy?**

In order to get an idea of the political representatives’ course of ambition, they were asked to show their attitudes towards five proposals which occur in the debate on how to use ICTs in the democratic process. Could it be that some proposals to use the new technology, more than others, are attractive to the Swedish politicians?

In order for the citizens to be able to make their choices at general elections, they need the information which makes it possible to form an opinion of the parties and candidates competing for their votes. Only if they can study political programmes and form an opinion of how those in authority have been acting, they will be able to make choices reflecting their political preferences. This kind of reasoning constitute the core of the indirect model of democracy. Information is a determining factor when it comes to the citizens’ being able to scrutinize those in authority and hold them responsible for their actions, collectively as well as individually. This kind of information may come, and most often does, from several different sources. Usually, information is provided through media, but sometimes also through political campaigns and discussions with individual politicians. The local government web sites may be a complementary addition to these sources, not just by providing the same information, but also by providing a more detailed and easily accessible information, such as records from various meetings. The first question aims at reflecting this accountability-enhancing aspect of
the Internet usage: how do the politicians view the proposal to publish political records of the city council and committees online?

A further kind of information is that which may underlie political standpoints and decisions. In order to make democracy more participatory, the citizens must get a chance of getting into the political issues before the decisions are made. This argument constitute an important part of the direct as well as the interactive model of democracy. Access to decision data is not just considered a determining factor when it comes to informed participants but for political commitment as well. Earlier, the access to decision data has been very limited. Today, an effective web site may offer extensive and detailed policy relevant information and a chance to study the most obscure and difficult propositions and reports. Our second question is whether the Swedish politicians are willing to invite the citizens to the political process, by publishing decision data on the Internet before city council and committee meetings take place.

The third question deals with the possibility of creating new public arenas where citizens can participate in political discussions. The occurrence of such arenas is particularly important in the interactive democracy, which above all gains legitimacy and stability out of an active public dialogue: horizontally, so that the citizens can decide on their preferences, and vertically, so that the citizens can express their wishes “upwards” to parties and representatives. From this perspective, it is a public concern to create these arenas, and they should be supported by public means (cf. Cohen, 1997). The municipalities can, for instance, offer online discussion forums and chat pages on their web sites, and thereby try to encourage an active citizenship, stimulate public debate and provide new channels to the citizens in order to make them more influential. What are the local politicians’ views on using online discussion forums including the public?

In the direct model of democracy it is not just considered important that the citizens get the opportunity of keeping up with politics and expressing their wishes to those in authority, it is also considered important that they can do this without being dependent on intermediate links. The Net can from this point of view enable continuous online polls and create immediate electronic feedback from voters to the elected (Bimber, 1998). The use of opinion polls enables the representatives to get an idea of the preferences of their voters in a way that makes the citizens less dependent on media, interest groups, parties and other intermediate
organisations for their participation. The question is whether the politicians consider it good or bad to conduct online polls in local issues of current interest?

Internet voting can be seen as a way of making the election procedure more simple, more flexible and cheaper from the perspective of increasing the participation in general elections and thereby strengthening the legitimacy of the representative system. The disabled, the elderly, travellers and people under stress would not have to go to a voting place to give their votes. But Internet voting is also an important part of the direct model of democracy, since this method, together with a more well-informed and competent electorate, offers a chance of making direct participation more frequent (Solop, 2000). Finally, we ask about the politicians’ attitudes towards conducting online referendums.

Table 5. Attitudes towards a number of proposals for using ICTs in the democratic process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposals</th>
<th>Radical optimists</th>
<th>Conservative optimists</th>
<th>Radical pessimists</th>
<th>Conservative pessimists</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publish political records online</td>
<td>91 (99)</td>
<td>91 (79)</td>
<td>83 (6)</td>
<td>88 (33)</td>
<td>91 (226)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publish documents before meetings online</td>
<td>89 (102)</td>
<td>82 (79)</td>
<td>67 (6)</td>
<td>79 (33)</td>
<td>85 (228)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use online discussion forums</td>
<td>89 (102)</td>
<td>75 (77)</td>
<td>50 (6)</td>
<td>39 (31)</td>
<td>76 (224)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct online polls</td>
<td>78 (102)</td>
<td>57 (76)</td>
<td>50 (6)</td>
<td>38 (32)</td>
<td>65 (223)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct online referendums</td>
<td>44 (99)</td>
<td>19 (78)</td>
<td>17 (6)</td>
<td>9 (33)</td>
<td>29 (222)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments on tables: The politicians could choose between the following alternatives when answering the questions: "a very good proposal", "a fairly good proposal", "a neither good nor bad proposal", "a rather bad proposal", "a very bad proposal" and "no opinion". The percentage favourably disposed refers to those whose answers were "very good proposal" or "a fairly good proposal".

Table 5 summarises the politicians’ views on the different proposals for changing democracy by using ICTs. The proposals are placed in order of preference; the most favoured proposals are found on top of the table, and the least favoured at the bottom. The results reveal that there is a majority of positive attitudes towards four out of five proposals. Thus, the majority of the
proposals for change seem to appeal to most politicians. However, the number of positive opinions become fewer when moving from proposals that concern dissemination of information to proposals that concern two-way communication. It is also worth noting that the politicians’ opinions on the democratic potential of the Internet, and its chance to create political equality, have an impact on the very issues which deal with communication. When it comes to the proposals that concern the dissemination of information, there are not any greater differences between the various categories of politicians. They have, however, relatively different attitudes towards the proposals that concern the discussion forums, public opinion surveys and Internet voting.

The most attractive proposal when it comes to communication concerns the possibility to create a discussion forum on the Internet, which indicates that the politicians are more positive to proposals which lean towards interactive democracy, rather than direct democracy. This impression is confirmed by the fact that the only proposal which receives more negative votes than positive ones, is the proposal to conduct popular votes on the Internet. To be sure, the issue of Internet voting has been racing up the political agenda in Sweden, due to, among other things, the declining participation in general elections. A parliamentary assembled commission has proposed that Internet voting should be trialled (SOU 2000:1), the majority of the political parties has claimed to be positive towards Internet voting (Vision 01-02-04), and according to a recent public opinion survey, 55 per cent of the voters would prefer the Internet to the traditional voting place if there was a choice (SCB 2001). But the proposal for more frequent elections by conducting popular votes in specific factual issues, implies a more pronounced ideological dimension, which is also suggested by the answers in Table 5. A common view is that to have more frequent votings between the elections, runs the risk of making politics more populist, and timorous politicians might then not dare to make unpopular though important decisions with an election always at hand. The fact that twice as many radical optimists as conservative optimists have a positive attitude towards this, also suggests that the view on equality is particularly important when it comes to electronic voting. This is not surprising, since one of the most serious charges against Internet voting involves the question about the discriminatory impact it may have for specific groups in the population. According to Davis (1999), electronic voting, as a supplement to traditional voting, would not disenfranchise others, but it would still disadvantage them vis-á-vis the more active. And exclusive Internet voting certainly shift the bias toward the middle and upper classes; the already politically active.
To sum up, it seems as if the ideas to develop the democracy by using the Internet has reached and convinced the Swedish chairmen of the municipal executive boards. They are not just optimistic about the potential of the technology in order to strengthen democracy, many of them are also positive towards the more participatory orientated reform proposals. Only the proposal for conducting popular votes on the Internet receives more negative votes than positive ones. It is now time to study if the politicians’ positive opinions about ICT is being put into political actions on the local political arena. Is there a connection between word and deed, between formal and active norms?

Assessing the online conditions

The most direct method of studying how local governments are using the Internet, is a systematic examination of their Internet products, i.e. their web sites. A content analysis of 289 Swedish local government web sites were conducted during January and February in the year of 2001. Of course, this examination can only provide a snapshot of web sites at one point in time. The exercise need to be repeated in future years to monitor how far local government web sites adapt to the new technological developments. Also, we need to do more in-depth analysis of sites. Still, this study can provide a first indication of how far the municipalities have got when it comes to offering the citizens information and possibilities to interactive communication on their web sites.

Today, all Swedish municipalities are represented on the Internet, but there are wide variations in quality and activity. The first thing we examined was the various information features that local government web sites have online. More precisely, we studied the citizens’ possibilities to receive information in connection with the meetings of the municipal council and the municipal executive board. It was demanded that the municipality provided all information, and not only selected parts thereof, both when it comes to minutes or other documents from meetings. A greater insight presupposes that both parties in the communications process are on an equality, i.e. that the citizen has the possibility to get hold of the document he or she wants to from the municipal machinery.

From the Figure below it becomes apparent that many local governments have put accountability-enhancing material such as minutes online. Also, the vast majority of sites provide the meeting schedules for municipal council (75%) and municipal executive board
(65%). Considerably fewer municipalities present the issues which will be discussed on the next meeting, on the Internet. One can also note that it is more common to publish the agendas before the open municipal council meetings (45%) than before the closed municipal executive board meetings (32%). In order to really give the citizens a possibility to get into the issues on the agenda and encourage participation on equal conditions, one has to climb further up on “the ladder of information” (Bellamy & Raab, 1999), by letting them study the documents which underlies decisions before the decisions are made. The Figure below shows that, today, only four per cent of the municipalities do this before the municipal council meetings, and three per cent do it before municipal executive board meetings.

*Figure 1. Online Provision of Information, percentage*

![Figure 1](image_url)

In our examination of the web sites, we also looked for several key features within each site that would facilitate the interactive connection between government and citizens. The first of these features was e-mail capability. Here we studied, among other things, whether a web site visitor could e-mail the chairman of the municipal executive board. If a person can merely look at information on a government web site, without being able to contact at least one politician, the potential for two-way interaction is thwarted. On the majority of the web sites, this technology was available; 75 per cent had the e-mail address to the chairman of the municipal executive board.

While e-mail certainly is the easiest method of contact, there are other methods that government web sites can employ to facilitate democratic conversation. These include opportunities for public participation in online polls, regular online discussion forums and
chat pages. These technologies were nowhere near as prevalent as e-mail; only 14 per cent of the web sites offered discussion forums, two per cent offered regular chat pages or recurrent chats with politicians, and five per cent used online polls. The access offered to the parties was somewhat limited as well. The parties or their representatives were very seldom given the opportunity to comment on the pursued policy, or to present their own policy, on the local government web sites, and only six out of ten municipalities facilitated the citizens’ contacts with the parties by providing links to their own web sites. Even if this, to some extent, has to do with the fact that local parties do not have working web sites, these findings also suggest that local governments are not trying very hard to use the Internet to promote interparty competition.

Figure 2. Opportunities for Interactive Communication, percentage

Although the politicians have a positive attitude towards the opportunities offered by the Internet, it is easy to conclude that they fail to exploit these opportunities on their web sites. For instance, 85 per cent of the politicians claim to be positive towards publishing documents on the Internet before meetings and 75 per cent claim to be positive towards using discussion forums, while this is offered by only 4 respectively 14 per cent of the municipalities. This means that there is an interesting discrepancy between what the politicians say they want and what they really do. To further analyse this relationship we need to compare municipalities more systematically. Experience shows that some organisations are not as open to new ideas as others. While some municipalities always tend to adopt them, others only on rare occasions allow themselves to be influenced. There are wide variations in openness, and there seem to be a pattern. This has been described as that some municipalities are pioneers while others are
followers or standbys (Schmidt, 1986), or that some municipalities are active while others are passive (Henning, 1996). The innovation research is, however, characterised by considerable disagreement about what factors that have an influence on the tendency to innovate:

Factors found to be important for innovation in one study are found to be considerably less important, not important at all, or even inversely important in another study (Downs and Mohr 1976:700).

In this paper, we will examine the relationship between the leading politicians’ attitudes and the municipalities’ tendency to innovate. This is done with the help of three indexes. The Information Index and the Communication Index were each produced by summing the separate indicators in figure 1 and 2, and by standardising the results to 100-point scales. The indicators of the two indexes were then added together into an overall Total Score.

**Table 6. Local government web sites and attitudes towards digital democracy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean Information Index</th>
<th>Mean Communication Index</th>
<th>Mean Total Score</th>
<th>Number of Municipalities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical optimists</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative optimists</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical pessimists</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative pessimists</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Earlier in this paper we made the assumption that the politicians’ interpretations of the democratic potential and ability of the technology to create political equality, should be of importance when it comes to their will to experiment with new methods and techniques based on ICTs. We said that a pessimistic interpretation of the technology in combination with a reinforcement perspective, probably would result in a lack of interest and a limited use of it, while a general optimism combined with a mobilisation perspective probably would result in commitment and active initiatives. The results in table 6 show that the politicians’ attitudes towards new ICTs hardly have any significance at all on the information provided and the opportunities for interactive communication offered by the local governments. Local governments in which the chairman of the executive board is a "conservative pessimist" provide web sites that are almost as rich in information, and give almost as many
opportunities for interactive communication, as those which have a “radical optimist” as chairman. While we are not controlling for any municipal specific factors, the result must be treated with some caution, but the result confirms undeniably the impression that there is a great difference between what the politicians claim they are aiming at, and what they actually do.

**Conclusions**

In this paper we have examined the relationship between ideas, intentions and initiatives in the process of wiring Swedish local governments. We started off by review some of the normative theoretical arguments in favour of digital democracy, and by examining how the Swedish chairmen of municipal executive boards relate to the new ideas. We found, on the whole, optimistic views, and positive attitudes, not only to the proposals supporting the indirect model of democracy, but also to proposals aiming at developing more participatory forms of democracy. The most significant finding, however, came up in the third part of the paper and concerns the lack of causality between the politicians expressed intentions and the local government initiatives. In this concluding section we shall elaborate on this topic and discuss some implications for understanding the role of the Internet in Swedish local governments.

Firstly, it seems like the municipalities have entered the world of the new technology almost without any predefined, explicit strategies. The most manifest evidence of this, is that only 20 per cent of the municipalities have agreed on a policy on ICT and democracy (Kommunaktuellt 2000, nr 16). This, and claims from spokespeople of the municipalities that there has been some resistance within the organisations towards the implementation of the new ICTs, imply that new technology is still not a very well integrated part of the municipalities’ activities. In many cases, the initiative to adopt new ICTs comes from individuals without any prior discussions within the organisation, mainly as a result of other municipalities’ adoption of web sites as well as the general public rhetoric on the information society. A parallel can be drawn to a study of the municipal organisations of the Swedish parties in 1998, which revealed that a majority of the participating chairmen of all the parties consider that they ”have to keep up with the development within ICT because other parties do so” (Gidlund and Möller, 1999). The answers to this question indicate that there is a certain pressure by the institutional environment to incorporate the modern and legitimate ideas about using new ICTs. Thus, organisations, such as municipalities and parties, are in a dilemma: on
the one hand they are not ready for fundamental institutional change; on the other hand they need to adapt to the ideas and techniques that are regarded as modern and that are supposed to give the organisation legitimacy. One way of dealing with this problem is to adopt new concepts, but at the same time try to keep them ”disengaged” so that they will have little impact on the activities. They claim to have adopted the new technology, but, in practice, it will not be allowed any greater importance; talk is separated from practice, ideas are separated from activities (Røvik, 1998; Brunsson, 1989).

Secondly, it is evident that the politicians’ access to and knowledge of the Internet, have not, so far, been paid attention to to any greater extent. It is rather common that the politicians themselves, and laymen politicians in particular, do not have access to the basic requirement (computer, e-mail, and the Internet) that are necessary in order to take an active part in the political activities on the Net (Ranerup, 1999). If ICT is to be used to a greater extent in the democratic processes, it is, however, necessary that the politicians generally have the ICT easily accessible in their political work. This means that the politicians need not only to decide upon communication strategies, but also to decide whether to give themselves hardware and software, as well as the expertise to connect to and use the Internet in the ways suggested by these strategies (Zittel, 1999). So far, few municipalities seem to have accepted this challenge; only 10 per cent of the municipalities offer home computers to their politicians, and usually this offer only applies to members of the municipal executive board and its working committee (Kommunaktuellt 2000, nr 16).

A third distinctive trait of the local ICTs policy, is that the power of social production lies within the bureaucracy. Instead of moving the development forward, the politicians have relied on ICTs experts to create solutions. This means that the municipalities’ Internet usage, to a great extent, is dependent on the fact that there are motivated actors within the organisation, who have the will and ability to organise ideas and activities so that the process can be driven forward (Wihlborg, 2000). Municipal officers often have an active interest in using the advantages of the new media, but at the same time they also find it difficult to develop new democracy functions, if they do not have the politicians’ active consent; with the result that the same functions as earlier are conveyed, but on the Net, and that information communication technologies in themselves become the solution to the problems of democracy.
In this concluding part of the paper, we have tried to outline a few characteristic features of the Swedish local ICT policy. We have argued that the loose connection between the politicians’ attitudes and the municipalities’ web activities, partly is due to the fact that the politicians not yet have set up a distinct policy on how to use the new technology within the municipality; that there is still no working ICT support for the elected politicians, and that the development of digital democracy, consequently, is driven more by municipal officers than by politicians. The discrepancy between what politicians claim they are aiming at and what they actually do leaves, however, several questions to be dealt with in future research: what are the mechanisms translating technological change into political change? How do media and media changes relate to political change and different concepts of democracy? How do the Internet effect culture and practices? To answer these questions we need to examine more in depth why the technology is translated, how it is translated, and by whom. Above all, it seems important to link ideas more closely to institutions. Political innovations are, rather often, blocked or hampered by the present political institutions, which are orientated towards and structured according to a different political public. There is a temporal lagging behind between the new developing public; which tries to reorganise institutions, and the present public which has formed the present institutions. This tension between stability and change forms all new political forms, and it seems to be a difficult process.

References


Kommunaktuellt 2000, nr 16, *Snigelfart när demokratin ska ut på nätet*.

Kommunaktuellt 2001, nr 1, *Inte lätt hitta rätt på Internet*.


Norris, Pippa (2000a) *Democratic Divide?* Paper presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting in Washington DC.


Vision 01-02-04, *Politikerna vill ha e-val 2006*.
