Enhancing Political Knowledge in the Public Sphere through eParticipation: Where is the Value?

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Abstract: There are complex interdependencies between the quality of democratic processes and governance within a community/society and the dynamics of social and economic development within such communities/societies. Strengthening participation and democratic decision-making through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is one of the five major objectives in the European Union's i2010 eGovernment action plan. Research supports the claim that both workers and citizens learn in deliberative contexts and eParticipation here refers to efforts to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another, with civil servants, and with elected representatives using ICTs. This working paper tentatively addresses the challenges and barriers to value and intellectual capital creation in the public sphere through eParticipation which are largely both intangible and multidimensional by nature. As noted in the Edinburgh Workshop (DEMO-net, June 2006) on eParticipation insights from political, economic, social and socio-technical sciences are needed to more clearly delineate pragmatic conceptualisations of this form of intangible public value. The key question—Where is the value? This working paper is a preliminary attempt to translate insights from the intellectual capital (IC) and intangibles discourses (people, structural and relationships dimensions) and critical management studies (CMS) to the domain of eParticipation with a focus on citizens as distinct from knowledge workers. Theoretically we draw broadly on Habermas' take on deliberative democracy built on his theory of communicative action, identify some limits on the pubic sphere, and identify a number of instances of value from a preliminary review of the economics literature.

Keywords: Conceptualising Public Value; Deliberative Democracy; eParticipation; Political Knowledge; Public Sphere

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> The capacity of the public sphere to solve problems *on its own* is limited[1]. But this capacity must be utilised to oversee the further treatment of problems that take place inside the political system ... the communication structures of the public sphere *relieve* the public *of the burden of decision-making*; the postponed decisions are reserved for the institutionalised political process. (Jürgen Habermas, 1996: 359 & 362)

INTRODUCTION

This is a working paper. It is a very preliminary attempt to address the question of value, specifically public value and citizen value, in eParticipation discourse, practice and research.[2] It is motivated by our own experiences as researchers over the past number of years. In other words, why bother with this stuff?—what does it contribute?—why is it worthwhile?—and so on. Such reflexive questioning leads us to address some of the 'taken for granteds' within our research/practice community. eParticipation refers to efforts to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another, with civil servants, and with elected representatives using ICTs. But is eParticipation really of value to citizens, society and economy?—is there real evidence to back up this foundational assumption? In other words, is democracy itself of value? If eParticipation is of value to citizens, society and economy—where is this value?—what is its nature?—how does it manifest itself?—how do we research it?—can such value be measured?—and so on.

These are deceptively simple questions, but the more one thinks about them and attempts to grapple with them the more complex and frustrating the 'question of eParticipation value' becomes. As Macintosh and Whyte (2006: 3) put it: "rigorous evaluations of eParticipation applications are hard to find". The challenge here may be succinctly summarised as follows:

> [The] challenges and barriers of public value and public value creation are multidimensional by nature: economic, social, socio-technical and political sciences need to bring forward a clear understanding of the public value and the impact of modern ICT to generate public value in the context of eParticipation. Practice has to demonstrate the scientific concepts explaining public value in the context of eParticipation. (Demo-net Workshop, Edinburgh, 2006: 32)

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[1] Cohen and Arato (1992) also note 'the *limited scope for action* that civil society and the public sphere afford to non-institutionalised political movements and forms of political expression' (in Habermas, 1996: 370).

[2] Of necessity we focus mainly in the OECD area and the EU in particular; over 2 billion people do not have access to basic electricity, let alone the Internet; see Desai et al. (2002) for a global listing of the 'technology achievement index' (TAI) of nations.

This helps, and we will take all the help we can get. Now we are addressing something that is multi-dimensional, and we are also seeking some scientific concepts. The reality begins to dawn that this is too big and the pragmatist insight unfolds that one can only digest a ton of multi-coloured rice one bite at a time, and over time; that said, the humility of acknowledged ignorance does tend to have a grounding effect so we decide to satisfice with a small few bites! Distinctions must now be made in order to progress. Which bites do we take? From where? How? Where do we draw the boundaries and how do we make distinctions?

To begin - we bite on democracy, and the role of participation/eParticipation in democratic processes; for scientific concepts we draw on political science, the discourse on deliberative (as distinct from other forms of) democracy, and specifically the work of Jürgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School critical tradition. Within eParticipation processes, and following Habermas (1996) on communicative interaction, one can claim that there is value in each such interaction. But all interactions are not of similar value—such value will depend on content, participant relationships, and context. The procedural properties of the communicative relation are universal—but issue, content and people are always contextual to particular lifeworlds and subject to differing impacts from their related systems of economy and administrative power with both law and technology viewed as possibly mediating such impacts. Research also supports the claim that both workers and citizens learn in deliberative contexts leading to the provisional claim that eParticipation may enhance political knowledge in the public sphere.

As members of a research group we are reasonably strong enough in the 'social, socio-technical and political sciences' noted in Edinburgh. Value? The dismal science beckons and, albeit somewhat tentatively, we attempt to answer the call here. The fact/value distinction is as old as time, is far from settled, but does lead us towards scientific concepts in economics[3]—but again, as with democracy, there are many forms of economics so we must make further distinctions. 'Economists do bowl with political scientists and sociologists, but in separate lanes'; micro-economists now study social interactions in the family and in communities and macro-economists note the influence of institutions, such as the judiciary and transparent government, on economic and social development (Costa & Kahn, 2002). We tend to privilege developmental economics, largely influenced by the work of Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, and we complement this with some insights from recent research on intangibles (both social capital and intellectual capital) as we have a sense, although we present no definitive empirical evidence as yet, that value in eParticipation is largely intangible.

Can we begin now? No. There are different levels of analysis possible—citizen/individual, collective/community, local, regional, national, supra-national, administrative, executive, representative, global, and others. We privilege citizens here placing this exploration more from a lifeworld than from a system perspective—that sorts that one, while leaving more than enough rice for others, particularly those who have more systems and administrative/managerialist appetites, to be dining out on. Can we begin now? No. The issue of research method remains—does one follow

[3] Note that this does not signify our support of the *economic theory of democracy* which 'presupposes a methodological individualism and focuses mainly on the process of legitimation', enlightened self-interest, and the idea that 'transactions between rationally choosing voters and political elites supposedly yield decisions that are rational insofar as they take into account the aggregation of individual interests of equal weight' (See Habermas 1996: 333-4 &ff; and Sen 1977: 328ff on 'rational fools').

the analytical or systems approaches (seeking explanatics, prediction and control) or a more hermeneutic approach (seeking understanding)? As we know so little we make no apology for privileging the latter in empirical research here—understanding precedes explanatics in this case—but we advocate multiple methods to be used as appropriate, as in the more sophisticated literature on intangible values and intellectual capital[4].

At this stage we look back at our own co-creative experiences and dialogue with some Irish activist citizens involved in eParticipation, and we make a judgement call, as distinct from an analytically validated scientific finding, on three intangible values that we can identify and mutually agree on: accessibility, involvement, and mutual recognition[5]—and we touch on these throughout this exploratory paper. The complexity of the issue of eParticipation value addressed has not gone away—but we have, hopefully, made aspects of it less opaque and we now at least have some less vague idea of which bits and pieces of it we are trying to get at. This is a short introduction—but, it has taken us more than a few years of experience in this area to write it.

The structure of the remainder of the paper is as follows: (i) we first address democracy in general terms and we note its fragility; (ii) we then begin a more economistic exploration on the eParticipation theme where a number of values, constraints, and mediating factors are identified; the paper concludes that economic arguments exist for the inclusion of citizens in discussions related to decision-making and policy making that directly affects them and that eParticipation does have modest potential in influencing such decisions and policies.

ON FRAGILE DEMOCRACY

> "The idea of democracy as a universal commitment is quite new, and it is quintessentially a product of the twentieth century" (Sen, 1999: 4).

When asked what was the most important thing that had happened in the 20th century the heterodox economist, and Nobel laureate, Amyrta Sen replied—the rise of democracy. Sen (1999) argues that "democracy has three distinctly positive contributions. First, it enriches individual lives through more freedom (involving political and civil rights). Second, it provides political incentives to rulers to respond positively to the needs and demands of the people. Third, the process of open

[4] See O'Donnell (2004) on how multiple methods may be used across differing ontological perspectives (analytical, systems, hermeneutics) and integrated using 'relative methodics' (Arbnor & Bjerke, 1997; see also Mingers, 2004; Dutton et al., 2006) in a discussion on doing empirical research on the Habermasian (1984, 1987, 1996) communicative relation. This 2004 paper provides a succinct introduction to the Habermasian communicative relation as a source of intangible value that can be translated to discourse on eParticipation (note that the communicative relation provides the foundation for Habermas' (1996) major work on deliberative democracy and law). We do not replicate any of this work here as our main focus in developing the present working paper is to gain some critically pragmatic insights from the dismal science on which we can build future more interdisciplinary oriented work. Andriessen (2004) provides a very useful overview on valuing intangibles.

[5] Brettschneider (2006), in an ambitious attempt to integrate liberal and proceduralist theories of democracy, bases this on three core values of democracy: equality of interests, political autonomy, and reciprocity. Although somewhat critical of Habermas he notes the centrality of reciprocity in the work of both Habermas and Rawls.

dialogues and debates, that democracy allows and encourages, helps in the formation of values and priorities, and this constructive function of democracy can be very important for equity and justice as well as efficiency."

Hamlett (2003) argues that theoretical and praxeological developments in both participatory public policy analysis and deliberative democracy provide fruitful initiatives for constructivist scholars eager to address normative concerns. So, is democracy necessary for social and economic development? Surprising as it may seem to the present largely European audience here in Bristol, this remains an empirically open question[6]. At a global level the Kantian project of a global 'cosmopolitan order', ongoing for the past two hundred years or so, is very far from being achieved and remains somewhat fragile as the recent expression of unilateralist superpower hegemony amply demonstrates (Habermas, 2006). Nor can it be claimed at the present time that colonial ideas of those who are either 'fit' or 'unfit' for democracy' are found solely in the history books. Within the EU, both France and The Netherlands rejected the proposed European constitution, many EU states declined to open their labour markets to new entrants, the zenophobic far right exerts a sizable influence which is also manifest within sections of academia, and there is quite some distance to be travelled before a sense of European identity embeds itself in 27 diverse European states and a multiplicity of European lifeworlds. Democracy is decidedly not a, or to be, taken-for-granted.

There is now substantial empirical evidence for the 'low level of perceived political influence and the low level of political discourse in Europe' (Frey & Stutzer, 2004; Coleman, 2005). Unsurprisingly, a major concern in recent political science commentary is that government (local, national, EU) has become both isolated from and unresponsive to its citizenry. Sen (1999) argues that 'the force of public discussion is not only one of the correlates of democracy' but that its cultivation can make democracy itself function better; sentiments very much in tune with the basic tenets of deliberative democracy. Democracy, by definition, demands a two-way flow of communication between government and civil society (Habermas, 1996).

> The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e. opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesised in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified *public* opinions. Like the lifeworld as a whole … the public sphere is reproduced through communicative action … tailored to the *general comprehensibility* of everyday communicative practice. (Habermas, 1996: 360)

Technology alone is not a panacea for solving political problems through discussions in the public sphere—but it is now commonly argued that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have the potential to facilitate such improved flows of communication, information sharing, feedback, and influence on policy making—hence, the fields and practices of eDemocracy and eParticipation.

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[6] Following WWII there was some belief in a tradeoff between democracy and economic growth: the Soviet Union's industrial expansion and the growth of many East Asian economies in the 1960s and 1970s (without full participatory democracy) provided some support. Mild forms of 'citizen' participation were/are found in Fascism, Totalitarianism, etc. (see Stiglitz, 2002); note the recent trip to China in 2006 by the UK eParticipation firm DialogueByDesign.

Coleman (2005) argues that the "decline in public engagement is best understood in the context of radical changes in public attitudes towards democratic institutions and actors, specifically attitudes of trust and efficacy". This is where insights from economics may assist some initial understanding as economists, not all of them of course, have addressed issues related to institutions, trust, and efficacy/efficiency. Coglianese's (2006: 10) recent review of studies of citizen participation in the 'old days' before the ICT 'revolution' finds a 'paucity of participation by ordinary citizens in agency rulemakings' in the US; most who do are representatives of various interest groups. Has this really changed in the information society?—not that much, we suspect—but we leave this for the moment as another open empirical question. That said, we unequivocally dismiss those who over hype and tend to revolutionise everything associated with ICT. We adopt the pragmatism of incremental evolution here.

> Will e-rulemaking actually increase thoughtful citizen participation in regulatory policymaking? The answer appears to be, after a careful consideration of the available evidence, decidedly "no". Based on the experiences to date with several different types of e-rulemaking, no signs of a revolution appear on the horizon. (Coglianese, 2006: 7-8)

We concur. There are pockets of substantive evolution—there is not a revolution in sight.

> Historically, power was embedded in organizations and institutions, organised around a hierarchy of centres. Networks dissolve centres, they disorganise hierarchy, and make materially impossible the exercise of hierarchical power without processing instructions in the network, according to the network's morphological rules. (Castells, 1996)[7]

Not simplistically so. The advent of new technology may lead to new modalites in the nature of relations between money, power and lifeworld; it does not necessarily lead to changes in the nature of those relations (O'Donnell & Henriksen, 2002).

> [T]here is no deterministic relationship between new media and democratisation. New [ICTs] can be utilised to replicate forms of bureaucratic practice and hierarchical power. This is most likely to happen when the socio-technical design of new media hardware, software and content is narrowly conceived and unaccountable; when elites retain exclusive access to ICT; and when interactive features are neglected or switched off, thereby blocking the feedback path which makes new media inherently polylogical. The use of new media for democratic purposes has more to do with political motivation, design and cultural acceptance than inherent technical affordances. But the relationship is dialectical: at any one time, the structure, regulation and uses of specific technologies are the subject of competing interpretive battles involving diverse actors, including producers, managers, users and commentators. (Coleman & Kaposi, 2006: 8)

[7] Cited in Coleman & Kaposi (2006)

ICT does not necessarily lead to greater citizen emancipation and involvement; it can, and often is, applied to further strengthen extant power relations and enhance control. Frey and Stutzer's (2004) outline of the state of fiscal decentralisation in Europe, which we discuss in some detail below, provides a useful counterpoint to those who simplistically adopt the overly optimistic, and naïve, discourse of those who claim that we are living in a new networked information society where centralised forms of control no longer apply.

> [D]ecisions by governments do have profound implications for … basic human right(s) … should be made openly, and with the active and open participation of those affected by them. I am convinced that openness and participation will affect the nature of the decisions being made … Greater openness can be justified on instrumental grounds, as means to ends—ends like reducing the likelihood of the abuse of power. … [G]reater openness has an intrinsic value. Citizens have a basic right to know. (Stiglitz, 1999b: 26-27)

In the final instance, as Habermas 91996) reminds us, only the state acts. That said, eParticipation provides a new form of social space that can be appropriated by a public sphere that 'distinguishes itself through a *communication structure*[8] that is related to a third feature of communicative action; it refers neither to the *functions* nor to the *contents* of everyday communication but the *social space* generated in communicative action' (Habermas, 1996: 360). The citizenry participates but, paradoxically, does not make the final decisions—'the communication structures of the public sphere *relieve* the public *of the burden of decision-making*; the postponed decisions are reserved for the institutionalised political process' (Habermas, 1996: 362). This is our main theoretical contribution to this conference—citizens do not *make* policy or make final decisions—but they can, in theory, *contribute* to and *influence* such policies and decisions. The trick, and the real difficulty, is to mobilise such public spheres—to bring the public 'in', so to speak—and this is not primarily a technological problem. Now, back to the 'value question'.

ON PARTICIPATION & ePARTICIPATION (small 'e'; big 'P')

Based on six eGovernment best-practice cases analysed, Rainer and colleagues (2006: 26) conclude that progress in the eParticipation field is 'a question of integration rather than invention'. First, how does one gather input from various channels (phone, email, mail, etc.), 'integrate it technologically and sort it according to topics'. Second, how does one involve a 'wide array of users and keep them interested?' Third, how does one integrate different levels of administration? One observes the 'systems' level of analysis of these authors here, which is perfectly valid. In this paper we try to take more of a 'lifeworld' perspective.

According to Stiglitz (1999a), 'Participatory processes must entail open dialogue and broadly active civic engagement, and they require that individuals have a voice in the decisions that affect them.' Why begin to tease out the economics of

[8] Accessibility is central to ICT facilitated structures and spaces here; see Acland (2003: 6-7) for concise practitioner derived rules of thumb on enhancing accessibility and involvement in eParticipation.

eParticipation?—and to quote probably the least ideological liberal to find a desk at the World Bank! Basically, economic arguments tend to carry weight with leading actors and decision makers, particularly at national level, and especially in government departments of finance[9]. Stiglitz (1999a) uses the term 'participation' in its broadest sense, to include transparency, openness, and voice in both public and corporate settings. Participatory processes may be institutionalised not only at national government level, but also at local and provincial levels, at the workplace, and in capital markets. Thus far, there has been little discussion of how business and employers might facilitate worker-citizens in taking part in eParticipation processes. In fact it is probable that many might receive official disciplinary warnings for abuses of company property and time were they to do so—yet most citizens probably access the Internet more at work than they do at home! With increasing emphasis on corporate governance and emerging ideas of corporate social responsibility, however sceptical one views such developments, there is a case for labour law and progressive trade unions and works councils to address here. Estlund's (2003) research on the workplace and democracy, for example, is motivated by her dissatisfaction with the neglect of the workplace in political and social theory and in most accounts of civil society. Stiglitz probably earned his Nobel prize, if in part, for his earlier work on human capital or 'worker capital'—yet he has become one of the most eloquent advocates of what could be termed 'citizen capital'.

Processes, not just outcomes, are key to this broader interpretation of participation—where value may also be found within such processes themselves. Citizens may value 'increased possibilities for participation as much as faster, smoother transactions' with administrative agencies/agents; outcomes related to governance and citizenship differ from outcomes stated simply in terms of transaction cost reductions, efficiency, and speed' (Fountain (2003: 44). As the output quality of any participation exercise is difficult to determine, Rowe and Frewer (2000) suggest the need to consider which aspects of the process are desirable and then to measure/evaluate the presence or quality of these process aspects in terms of both 'acceptance criteria', concerning features of a method that make it acceptable to the wider public, and 'process criteria', concerning features of a participation process that are liable to ensure that it takes place in an effective manner.

The skills gap, however, is a real issue and precedes both acceptance and process. Massive financial investment in both infrastructure and human capital would be required to ensure equality of eParticipation in terms of accessibility to online processes and to ensure that levels of complexity in legislative material/information presented electronically be re-ordered so that it becomes understandable to the 'average citizen'—who remains as a mere abstraction. Take Ireland for example. Currently there is very little research on the relationships between demographics and online participation (Demo-net, 2006). The most recent comprehensive study of ICT in Ireland finds that "the main digital divide among private individuals relates to divergences between groups defined in terms of education, social class, age and economic status. Age and education are possibly the most important structural

[9] As Lars Hasselblad Torres of www.AmericaSpeaks.org put it in answer to the question on 'where is the value?' on the ukie & consult dowire listserv: 'It's a nut many federal managers in the US, who are "champions" of this work, want to be able to answer—to better make the case internally.' Useful comments on these lists were also made/received from Steven Lenos, Pedro Prieto Martín, Kevin O'Malley, Stuart W. Shulman, Ella Smith, Patrick Dufour, Andrew Acland, Tom Steinberg, Gez Smith, Peter Thomson, Matthias Trenel, Hans Hagedorn. Thanks to Steven Clift for setting up these useful knowledge-sharing lists.

dimensions of potential e-exclusion" (Williams et al., 2004). The Irish economy in recent years is consistently at the top of the OECD growth table with an average GDP growth rate of 7.5% between 1995 and 2005 and the fourth highest GDP per capita in the world in 2005 (OECD, 2006). Yet it has one of the worst broadband internet uptake rates in the OECD (24th of 31 in 2005), due largely to issues arising from the privatisation of the Irish telecommunications sector. Sophisticated eParticipation methods/technologies are of zero value to those with no skills, no online access, or a poor and horrendously slow dial-up connection. Without access/accessibility, involvement is not on, and mutual recognition cannot be even entered into the value equation[10].

Another key insight emerging from recent studies in development economics is that 'civic engagement is lower in more heterogeneous [as distinct from homogeneous] communities'—that is, heterogeneity tends to lower social capital (Costa & Kahn, 2002). There is growing interest in the economics of social capital and the association between social capital and effective institutions. Social capital is "understood roughly as the goodwill that is engendered by the fabric of social relations" and which is capable of being "mobilised to facilitate action" (Adler & Kwon, 2002: 17). Accounting and finance academics and practitioners have tried and failed over the past century or so to translate the value of 'goodwill'—it is simply recognised by its 'residual' nature. Researchers and practitioners of eParticipation are likely to meet similar problems in conceptualising intangible value. Similarly in the intellectual capital discourse many now explore the relationship between social capital and intangible value creation (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) where the accounting treatment of 'goodwill' is re-coded as an indicator of ignorance and the point of departure for real work. Low trust levels predict less efficient judiciaries, more corruption, and lower quality government bureaucracies; conversely, high trust levels predict economic growth and financial development; and absence of social capital may explain low levels of spending on such public goods as education and welfare (Costa & Kahn, 2002[11]). There is now a vast literature on social capital—but the key point that we wish to emphasise here is that:

> Whether an attribute of an individual or a society, social capital is produced by individual's participation decisions. An individual can to some extent increase the number and depth of [her/his] connections with others, but the value of these connections depends upon the actions of others. Social capital, therefore, depends both upon individual socioeconomic and demographic characteristics and upon the characteristics of society. (Costa & Kahn, 2002).

[10] In the local rural village in Ireland where one of the authors lives, where it is not apparently economical for the dominant hegemon to provide broadband, an explosion of BEBO usage among teenagers/early twenties has been noted following a community initiative in bringing in satellite broadband access. With access, this demographic group has become much more active online, network effects are visible in its expansion, and it is now possible to think about how one might address this group in terms of democratic oriented eParticipation; prior to the provision of high-speed access in this rural village such thinking would be merely wasted abstraction. The author has also spent considerable time convincing non-ICT savvy 40-something and 50-something parents that online social networking sites such as BEBO and MySpace are educational, good for skills development and, if appropriately used, 'of value'!

[11] See Costa & Kahn (2002) for complete list of citations/research studies here.

Here we find some support from the economics literature on the probable value of 'mutual recognition' / 'reciprocity' within both participation and eParticipation processes and the necessity of addressing the homogeneity / heterogeneity continuum in any eParticipation context. Accessibility and involvement are necessary, and of value, but insufficient without mutual recognition from respective lifeworld participants and critically from system agents. Neither of the latter two forms of mutual recognition can be taken for granted. This is the deliberative democracy argument. As Habermas might put it—the communicative rationality of various lifeworlds has to be injected back into the systems of money and power. This is not that easy to conceptualise, or alone achieve, due to the different logics in play where the dominant "all pervasive language of the market puts all interpersonal relations under the constraint of an egocentric orientation towards one's own preferences. The social bond, however, being made up of mutual recognition, cannot be spelled out in the concepts of contract, rational choice, and maximal benefit alone" (Habermas, 2003: 110; see also Fagan et al., this Conference, Sen, 1977). Economics, particularly of the neo-classical variety, has its theoretical limits when it comes to addressing mutual recognition!

The classic example on the former cited by Costa & Kahn here is the 'Florida Effect' in public school expenditure. The average taxpayer in Florida is a white senior citizen—typical public school students are Hispanic; and there is less support for public school expenditure in Florida than in US states where students and taxpayers are of the same ethnicity. Racial, ethnic, and religious diversity and income inequality predicted past [and perhaps future] state educational expenditures in the US (Goldin & Katz, 1999). Spending on public goods such as education, roads, sewers and garbage pick-up is inversely related to an area's ethnic fragmentation, after controlling for other socioeconomic and demographic characteristics (Alesina et al., 1999). Sobering if dismal insights for those of us of a more Kantian cosmopolitan persuasion or for those who may simplistically advocate eParticipation processes as a panacea for many of the ills besetting our increasingly diverse societies[12]!

On mutual recognition from the latter (that is, system agents) there is ample evidence of the latently strategic actions of administrative agents and political representatives who go through the motions in a pretence at serious deliberation with citizens but who ignore input, fail to provide substantive feedback, and proceed to make unilateralist 'we know best' decisions in policy that directly affects such citizens[13].

Nor does eParticipation necessarily lead to an increase in trust levels, a key to increasing levels of social capital and intellectual capital. Coleman (2004), in an analysis of two eConsultations in the UK context – WomenSpeak and the Communications Bill – finds no definitive correlations between eParticipation and increasing trust levels:

> [The hypothesis] that online interaction between representatives and represented leads to greater trust between them, is not supported by the findings from these studies. In the case of WomenSpeak[14], many of the participants were dissatisfied with the contributions from MPs and were

[12] We promise not to mention BigBrother again in this paper.
[13] See O'Donnell et al. (2006a), Fagan et al. (2006) & Stephens et al. (2007) for examples from our own recent research on eParticipation in Ireland.
[14] Involving women survivors of domestic violence.

> unconvinced at the end of the consultation that MPs had been interested in what they had to say. Participants in the Communications Bill consultation were more divided over these questions, but, on balance, most considered that the committee had been interested in what they had to say and that members of the committee had participated in a satisfactory way.

Moreover, there are distinct differences in how citizens perceive the political process across Europe. Frey and Stutzer (2004) analyse data from the first wave of the European Social Survey conducted in 2002. Three items capture citizens' perceived understanding of politics, their effectiveness, and their involvement. On the item—'How often does politics seem so complicated that you can't really understand what is going on?'—responses on 'regularly or frequently cannot understand' range from 25% of Norwegians to 63% of Greeks; Ireland ~36% and UK ~41%[15]. On the item—'Do you think that you could take an active role in a group involved with political issues?'—responses in terms of 'probably not or definitely not' in 19 of 22 are over 50%, ranging from 35% in Denmark to 78% in Spain; Ireland ~70% and UK ~65%. Finally, on the item—'How often would you say you discuss politics and current affairs?'—responses in terms of discussing politics 'less often than once a month' is only 15% in Switzerland but 50% in Greece; Ireland ~40% and UK ~38%. Frey and Stutzer (2004: 4) conclude:

> … the survey results indicate that there are many people in Europe who are alienated from the democratic process despite Europe's commitment to democracy. However, the results also show sizable differences across countries. We hypothesise that part of the variation is due to difference in local governance. For example, it is suggestive that citizens in Switzerland, the only country in Europe that *gives citizens extended direct democratic participation rights at all levels of government*, have relatively high local power. A look at the rankings indicates that citizens in Switzerland belong to the top third with regard to local power and discuss politics more often than people in any other European country. (2004: 4; emphasis added)

The project of the Kantian global cosmopolitan order begins at local level. eParticipation is about power and leads to questions on its centralisation/de-centralisation in particular contexts. Does local government, for example, raise its own finance through local taxes or does it obtain its funding from central government's department of finance as in Ireland. For the former one may expect local interest in getting involved in local taxation issues; for the latter, probably little as it does not appear on the agenda if the local authority does not have the power to raise them. To the issue of homogeneity/heterogeneity in local lifeworlds we can now add the issue of centralisation/de-centralisation of power which is largely, if not completely, linked to finance. Back to Habermas – money, power and lifeworld – all three, and the mediating influence of law and technology, must enter into any substantive consideration of the value of eParticipation. Potential value in eParticipation will be substantially reduced in contexts where local government has little real power—a perennial discussion in Irish political discourse where it competes

[15] Pardon our privileging of 'these islands' here for this Bristol presentation. For full graphics on these three items, and the very interesting correlations between levels of fiscal decentralisation and the power of local lifeworlds, see Frey & Stutzer (2004).

with the century old discourse on draining the river Shannon; the Shannon still floods regularly and Ireland remains one of the most centralised democracies in Europe (see footnote 15 below).

Frey and Stutzer (2004: 8) find that for all three indicators of political participation noted above, measured correlations indicate a positive effect of fiscal decentralisation on local power; in more fiscally decentralised nations -

(i) less people think that politics is too complicated;
(ii) less people think that they could not take an active role in politics; and
(iii) more people are engaged in political discourse.

Frey and Stutzer (2004) note that 'this seems a promising starting point for further research; we concur while also noting that processes of decentralisation at national level parallel processes of further centralisation at a European level. It must also be noted that although Switzerland is diverse in terms of language etc there is probably a high degree of cultural homogeneity within each canton. A key point here is that the institutions of governance are significantly different across nations and that the nature of these institutions must impact on lifeworld-governance system relations and on possible opportunities for citizens in such lifeworlds to influence local and/or national policy and decision making. Forms of possible eParticipation value capability probably correlate with institutional possibilities for creating such value. In Switzerland, a federalist and highly decentralised society, Frey and Stutzer (2004: 6) note that democratic participation at local level generates the incentives necessary to bring about efficient outcomes of fiscal federalism; further, 'in addition to this instrumental value, participation is also valued in its own right and citizens gain procedural utility from living in an environment that grants political participation possibilities'. Such possibilities contribute to the 'procedural goods' of democracy (Lane, 1998); 'self-respect, feeling of personal control or understanding and public resonance'.

Ireland is found to be the least fiscally de-centralised in this study—promoting eParticipation at local level in Ireland is likely to be a much more difficult proposition than in Switzerland[16]. Because of the similarity in rankings between Irish and UK responses on these three items, it makes empirical sense for us as an Irish research group to study and learn from experiences in the UK's Local eGovernment initiative in which Bristol City Council played/plays one of the leading, and most active, roles[17].

Centralisation/de-centralisation related to power and participative decision-making is also generating a massive business literature. There is much discourse on the knowledge economy and on knowledge workers—there is far less on knowledge society and knowledge citizens. In the fields of both human resource management (HRM) and labour economics the whole area of employee participation in both decision making and financial participation also remains very weakly understood (see

[16] The countries included in this aspect of Frey and Stutzer's (2004) study, with the fiscal decentralisation scores (1 to 5) in parentheses, are as follows: Switzerland (4.0)), Denmark (3.0), Italy (3.0), Sweden (2.8), Germany (2.6), Poland (2.6), Norway (2.5), Hungary (2.5), Slovakia (2.4), Spain (2.3), Slovenia (2.2), Czech Republic (1.9), United Kingdom (1.8), France (1.7) and Republic of Ireland (1.3).

[17] It is not an accident that this exploratory working paper finds its first airing in the south west of England!

Poutsma, 2006 for a recent EU review on financial participation), notwithstanding considerable research effort. In terms of participation in decision-making in the workplace, this:

> "can be direct or indirect and there are substantial differences between information, consultation and decision making wherein the timbre of labour's voice can be addressed in terms of depth, level, form and scope ... One-way-traffic in communicating information by capital to labour remains the dominant mechanism … In terms of greater freedom in decision-making by labour on everyday operational issues one can view such developments as necessarily imposed due to the difficulty of monitoring intangible work. The greater the depth, level and scope and the more strategic the issue, however, one finds that capital tends to rely on communicating sufficient information to labour as distinct from engaging in any consultation process; decision making by labour on strategic issues is simply not on the agenda." (O'Donnell et al., 2006b: 115)

One could make parallel arguments on the relations between the citizenry and the elites of representative democracy—neither George Bush nor Tony Blair, for example, drew on participatory processes on their strategic decisions to breach the UN Charter and go to war against Iraq in 2003; issues of 'national security', however (ill)defined, are unlikely to find their way onto eParticipation agendas.

Gherardi and Nicolini (2000) note the emerging emphasis on the social and constructive character of knowing and learning—in opposition to the managerialist mainstream's one-sidedly rationalist, mentalist and representationalist view of knowledge and its obsession with predicting it, exploiting it, and most centrally, controlling it. This more social and constructive conception portrays 'organisational knowledge' [or indeed the political knowledge of a mobilised public sphere] as a 'form of distributed social expertise … knowledge-in-practice situated in the historical, socio-material, and cultural context in which it occurs' and as having the following characteristics:

> (i) it is situated in the system of ongoing practices;
> (ii) it is relational and mediated by artifacts [which for the purposes of this paper can refer to ICTs and eParticipation methodologies[18]];
> (iii) it is always rooted in a context of interaction and it is acquired through some form of participation in a community;
> (iv) it is continually reproduced and negotiated, and hence it is always dynamic and provisional. (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000: 333)

eParticipation may be reasonably viewed as a form of citizen knowledge-in-practice which is contextual, contested and (from Bacon to Foucault) power-laden both within its lifeworld/public sphere context and emanating from external system influences. Citizens may learn and political knowledge may be created in

[18] See Lukensmeyer & Hasselblad Torres (2006) for a US study; Macintosh & Whyte (2006), Macintosh et al. (2005), Rainer et al. (2006), Whyte et al. (2005) for reviews of a more European context; much work from this side of the pond is surprisingly neglected by Gene Rowe, a graduate of Bristol Business School at UWE, but whose work in this area is well worth exploring (Rowe and Frewer, 2000, 2004, 2005; Rowe et al. 2004).

eParticipation practices that follow a deliberative logic. As John Gastil (2006: 4) puts it: 'deliberative events are often found to increase participants' levels of political knowledge. Knowledge gains depend on the provision of new and accurate information, as well as the perception that the information is credible.' During such deliberative interactions citizens can not only express their own viewpoints, the norm in most extant one-way administrative driven forms of e-participation or e-consultation, but they can 'observe, and challenge, others with similar or opposing viewpoints or beliefs. In other words, both citizens and legislators (or their administrative agents) learn through participation in such communication flows—hence the stock of political knowledge is increased'; at least in theory. This facility to view more than one perspective on issues, and to communicate laterally with other citizens may enhance perceived balance, process credibility and somewhat ameliorate the power imbalances inherent in any deliberative process where the representatives of organised commercial interest groups tend to speak loudest and longest.

That said, it is probable that a tiny percentage of a population are sufficiently involved in particular policy issues to be able to address let alone answer substantive questions about many such issues[19], "resulting in extreme inequality in decision-pertinent knowledge. Sometimes only leaders have policy knowledge, itself an extreme form of inequality" (Muhlberger & Weber, 2006: 25). In one of the few analytical tests in this area, Muhlberger and Weber (2006) report mixed findings on a study of 500+ Pittsburgh residents who attended a one day deliberative event, but find that the deliberative process is a 'crucial' motivator. Gastil's (2004) studies on participants in the National Issues Forums in the US also report mixed findings[20].

We view such citizen knowledge-in-practice as foundational for a functioning deliberative democracy. Such local knowledge, both declarative and procedural, is not available to central government policy- or/and decision-makers unless it is communicated to them; nor are the viewpoints of local or central government agents available to local communities unless they be communicated to them in an accessible form and in a language that they can understand[21]. This demands shifts in extant balances of power—where resistance from both administrative and representative agents are to be expected based on the massive empirical literature on power and change management: it is sufficient for present purposes simply to state that this literature exists (see Henriksen et al., 2004 on power and change). This leads to the question of coming up with some convincing economic arguments to justify such shifts in power; and to provide an economic rationale to representatives with real power to initiate such change. Although heavily influenced by, and active participants

[19] Tom Steinberg on January 12th 2007 noted that the Travel Tax Petition in the UK had hit 300,000 signatures – representing ~ 1% of the population (UKIE dowire listserv). This also costs the authors £10 extra each to travel from Bristol to Ireland—where do we sign?

[20] Gastil's (2004) first study 'indicated that deliberative civic education had a negative relationship with participants' group efficacy and conversation dominance and positive associations with the ideological and demographic diversity of participants' conversation networks. A second study demonstrated that 'civic dispositions and behaviours were positively associated with forum experiences that involved higher levels of reading, listening, observing, and enactment. These findings suggest the potential value of deliberative forums as a means of civic education, but they also demonstrate that forums vary considerably in their educational impact.'

[21] It is now regularly noted that if the European Constitution, rejected by France and The Netherlands, is to be passed in future referenda—it will have to be re-framed in a language that the 'average citizen' (who still remains an abstraction) can understand.

in, Frankfurt School Critical Theory, which tends to privilege the collective over the individual, we now form a strange strategic alliance here for theoretical purposes.

In an increasingly knowing-intensive economy and society some insights of the Austrian School of Economics, shorn of its mid 20th century ideological baggage, which rabidly privileged the individual over the collective, are worth considering here. Foss (2001: 8) refers to situations in which the following two claims are descriptively adequate as 'Hayekian settings': (i) 'because of the increased need for firms to be source diverse, specialised knowledge in production, knowledge, as seen from the point of view of a manager, is becoming increasingly dispersed' in a Hayekian (1948) sense - 'In other words, when such knowledge is not possessed by any single mind, it is still necessary to somehow mobilise it for the carrying out of a productive task or a number of such tasks'; and (ii) 'because of the increased importance of sourcing specialist knowledge, knowledge assets controlled by individual agents ("knowledge workers" [or knowledge citizens]) are becoming increasingly important in production … in the sense of accounting for a greater part of the value added to goods'.

Translate these insights from one branch of the organisational economics of the firm to the public sphere and knowledge citizens and the need to involve citizens in policy discussions and decision-making that directly affects them, and where only the citizens themselves 'know' what is decisive, becomes apparent—and the power shifts that this entails can be justified in economic terms. This does not, of course, necessarily mean that such power shifts will ensue. Poor decisions waste tax-payers money[22] and well as often having deleterious side-effects or negative externalities to adopt the language of the economists; as knowing-society becomes ever more complex, and impossible to fully understand or indeed centrally control, one can draw on Hayekian arguments for devolving input to many key decisions to those who do 'know what is required'—quite often local citizens in local lifeworlds where eParticipation can probably make some valuable contribution to such democratic processes: similar arguments could be made for devolving certain functions from central government to local government. At the macro-economic level this may result in financially improved, if not optimum, solutions; but as the analysis cited above by Frey and Stutzer (2004) makes clear, this demands that the particularities of each political and administrative system be addressed. There is no universalist equation readily available here; we have identified a number of distinctions – homogeneity/heterogeneity in the community; degree of decentralisation of power, particularly fiscal power; key demographic antecedents; availability of ICT infrastructure and skills; and so on. But these are simply generalist variables worthy of consideration and then applied to the particularities of any eParticipation event in its particular lifeworld-system context. As Habermas (1996: 387) puts it: 'Those involved must start with their own current practice if they want to achieve clarity about what such a practice means in general'.

CONCLUSION (tentative)

For those of us who subscribe to the Kantian belief in global 'cosmopolitan order', the U.N. Charter, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the

[22] Kevin O'Malley of Bristol City Council, via the UKIE dowire list, provides the example of the UK's Poll Tax, and the massive expenditure that could have been saved, had the government that unilaterally implemented it consulted UK citizens on its appropriateness.

constitutionalisation of international law, and further deepening of the European project—assumptions and taken-for granteds, of whatever ilk, are dangerous. Drawing on insights from the dismal science, we make the not unreasonable claim that democracy itself cannot be assumed—to do so is to run the risk of losing it—as it has to be continuously re-generated from local lifeworlds by citizens themselves. Democracy is *the* core European value. To address value is to evaluate:

> Evaluation is firstly a practical concern of those responsible for understanding particular e-participation initiatives, who want to assess its value in relation to the policy-making objectives. It is also an academic concern of those who wish to develop an understanding of e-participation that is grounded in practice, build theory from it, and in turn inform broader e-participation practice. (Macintosh & Whyte, 2006)

Thus far, we have asked quite a few questions on 'value', and found very few definitive answers. Retaining the focus on a citizen-centred perspective, we have in recent times addressed such questions to activist Irish citizens and we have noted three to accompany this exploratory working paper: accessibility, involvement, and mutual recognition. The foundation of deliberative democracy is the unforced force of the better argument within the set of participatory communicative relations. Key for any citizen is to get in, to be able to take part in the conversation, and to be recognised. Labour, language, power, money and knowledge are *the* critical themes. The main barriers to citizen participation in policy and decision making are probably not technological; hence, we have initiated an exploration of the dismal science seeking to identify citizen value and an economic rationale for eParticipation.

Following Stiglitz' developmental economics, the mere fact of (e)participation in democratic processes is a public good in itself. Following Hayek (1948: 83-84), we translate his insight on the 'economic problem' to the problem of participatory democracy "as mainly one of rapid adaptation to changes in the particular circumstances of time and place" where "it would seem to follow that the ultimate decisions must be left to the people who are familiar with these circumstances, who know directly of the relevant changes and of the resources immediately available to meet them". However, even if decision making power is devolved or decentralised it does not necessarily follow that citizens will partake of such opportunities. That said, economics and politics, albeit linked, draw on their own intrinsic logics related to the systems of money and power; following Habermas, eParticipation is primarily of the lifeworld where it is probable that many quite simply do not possess a good enough understanding of regulatory policy issues at the national (or European) level but may have much greater familiarity and understanding of circumstances, relevant changes and resources at local level. It follows that progress is probably best pursued at this level; if citizen participants do not make the final decisions (which they rarely if ever do), they *can* influence the nature of such decisions. The real trick is to mobilise such eParticipatory public spheres: as Habermas (1996: 364) puts it—'There can be no public sphere without a public'.

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