TURUN KAUPPAKORKEAKOULU
TULEVAISUUDEN TUTKIMUSKESKUS

TURKU SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
FINLAND FUTURES RESEARCH CENTRE
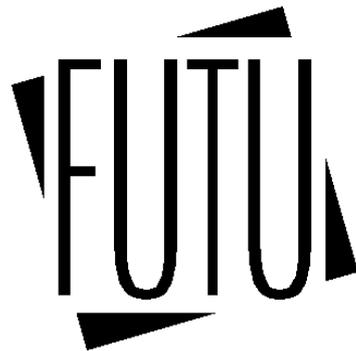
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Auli Keskinen

**PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY AND
CIVIL SOCIETY –
TRANSFORMING SOCIETAL DECISION
MAKING
IN THE INFORMATION AGE[1]**

The purpose of the research programme Citizenship and ecomodernization in the information society – the futures approach – is to study the social and ecological dimensions of emerging information society. Particularly we aim at assessing social impacts of new informational structures that are impinged on citizens. We also focus on analyzing the ways application of information technology influences on targets and realization of sustainable development. The study programme comprises of ten individual research project organized around above sketched themes.

Auli Keskinen
Researcher, M. Pol. Sc. (Stat.), B. Sc. (Math.)
Finland Futures Research Centre
Turku School of Economics and
Business Administration

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1.   INTRODUCTION

*"We cannot solve the problems that we have created
with the same thinking that created them".*   **Albert Einstein**

Various points of view to the current global social transition period and the coming of the information age, both of which are characterized by an unprecedented global telecommunications and information networks explosion will be discussed. Our position is that the rapid diffusion of computers and connected networks of electronic means, the information and communications technology (ICT) will have even more profound impact than before on various social phenomena such as work, entertainment, business, education and, most important of all, democracy - how it is understood, exercised and developed. What is ready to be born, then, is "teledemocracy" - a new form of direct democracy promoted by the ICT and Information Networks. So far, information networks, as one part of "the Information Society", have mainly been dealt with by governments and enterprises from the technological point of view.

Representative democracy is in crisis. Indeed, a growing number of observers agree that this few hundred year old idea and practice of democracy does not work so well any more in societies where an increasing number of people can gain more and more information on various social and political issues by having access to the ICT and vast amount of information. Thus large segments of the population are now and more so, in the future able to form personal educated opinions on common issues.

Many people have grown impatient with their governments which they see minding only narrow interests rather than fulfilling the major task of representative democracy, which is taking care of the citizens' common good. In modern societies, many people want to shift from being "the governed" into having "self government." They want to become actors in society instead of being mere subordinates. They want to have more power and control to conduct their own life as they want. The ubiquitous information networks and ICT of the future will be a readily available tool by which people can easily empower themselves, but only if they grasp the opportunity.

Public discussion on teledemocracy and the societal perspective of ICT is gradually gaining momentum. Information networks can and should be used for societal dialogue. Networks can be the new tool to enhance and reformulate the ways and ideas how democracy will be developed and executed in societies. The continued public discourse on the democratic potential of the information society must be encouraged - for example, on whose terms it will be developed and what effect the networking of people can have on their lives.

2.   DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY

In general, democracy is a dynamic process that has many features and development phases. There is no "right way" of executing democracy in a community. The communities must find alternative ways of democratic decision-making that will suit them through extensive and continuous interaction. Democracy is actually a life-long-learning process. The current representative democracy can be transformed to a process that has features and elements of the direct democracy. This can happen through various developing phases using the participatory and deliberative processes. The **new future democracy** that exploits ICT and information networks in ensuring the same level of information and knowledge to all citizens will be a hybrid of various strategies. In systems thinking, one can describe this new concept to be a **network of information and people joining in the decision-making process on deliberative basis.** In the following figure the alternative development phases are shown. The global scale will produce new interconnections among people and cultures in an unprecedented way in the future.
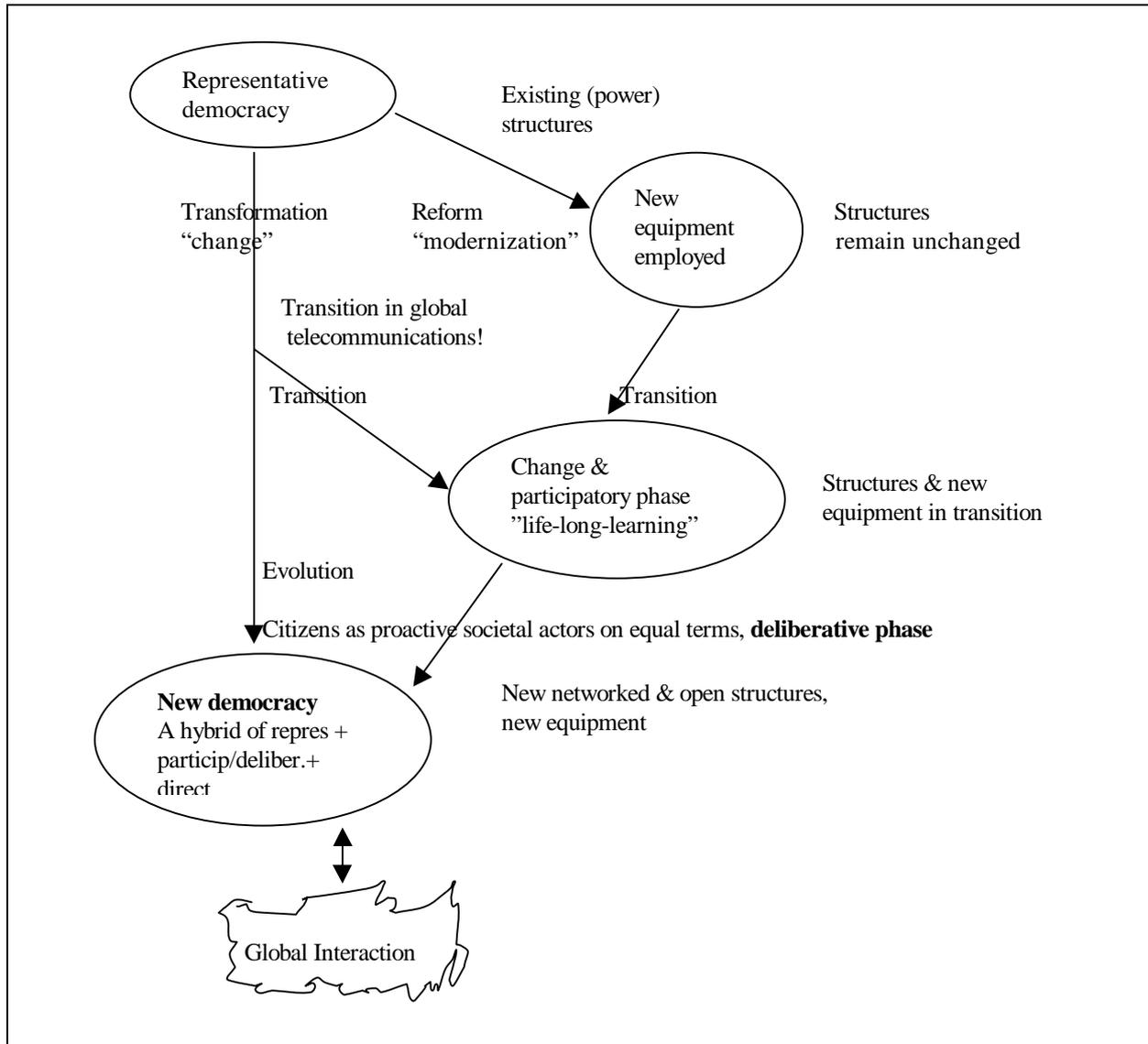
Figure 1. A Model Outline for New Democracy Building Process

It is important to see the difference between political **reform** and **transition**. The reform means actually that political procedures are modernized by using new technology but the power structures will remain unmoved. The transition means that societal power is redistributed and thus, more and more actors come into play. The necessary condition to this is of course access to information and task allocation in the society in a way that leaves room for citizen's personal decision power to be used for governing her/his own life.

3.   PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

The development phase of democracy that is called participatory is very well defined in Barber (1984). Participation of "ordinary" citizens in the societal and political decision making processes in the representative democracy is channelled through voting. When some of the issues are discussed and decided upon using dialogue between citizens and political representatives, the procedure is called participatory.

There have been various experiments on participatory democracy, especially in the USA. Professors Ted Becker (1986) and Christa Slaton (1992) have conducted several of those in Hawaii, Canada and some other countries. However, European developments have really gained momentum only after the introduction of the Information Society in mid-1990's and boosted by the explosion of Internet. The first futures oriented conference on the issue of democracy development and ICT was held in Munich, Feb. 1997, with the title: "Internet and Politics". In Finland, there was the first book on teledemocracy published by the author and a group of colleagues in 1995 (Keskinen 1995). The international discussion on teledemocracy is today happening in the web, in particular in the "teledemocracy home page" in **http://www.auburn.edu/tann** (TANN = Teledemocracy Action News & Network).

3.1.   Direct Democracy

New development in political science and democracy is focusing on direct democracy, which can be described as "a process where citizens together make societal decisions based on dialogue on equal terms". It differs from representative decision-making in that every participating citizen is exercising her/his own personal power. One example of a method for direct democracy is referendum. However, most referenda today are not manifesting direct use of individual citizen power, because the agenda and alternatives used in the process are not chosen by the citizens (see the example). In practice, various mixtures of direct and representational approaches are used. Participatory and deliberative approaches can be denoted as direct procedures. Direct democracy movement that raises its head everywhere most likely will lead to various mixtures of different approaches (see Figure 1). However, representative democracy as such can be developed, too. New ideas of using lot or random sample in selecting

political decision-makers are introduced by Dr. Slaton and Dr. Benjamin Barber (see Slaton 1992 and Barber 1984).

3.2. Munich Conference

In his speech at the Munich conference Dr. Benjamin Barber, who is the prime expert on enhanced, or strong democracy presented one of the most profound questions that has to be widely discussed, the question of will and desire for change, saying: "without a will towards a more participatory and robust civic system, why should technologically enhanced politics not produce the same incivility and cynicism that characterize politics on the older technologies, radio and television, for example?"

Barber states that technology can assist political change but only if there is a genuine political will to make it happen. I think it is important to note that in history, the power structures have changed mainly two way, either the structures have corrupted from inside and collapsed or there has been a revolution outside the structures resulting to a collapse. But the third alternative that we now call for, namely the **voluntary reallocation of power** for the benefit of citizens steered society, is very challenging indeed. It would really need a new kind of understanding of shared societal power to be a worthy goal. I would like to argue that now is the time that this new understanding can have a practical chance with the help of new global ICT and Internet. However, many scientist, though they see a fair chance for new thinking to be spread around the globe, remain unmoved and cynical. Why should those who have the power, voluntarily let even part of it go? What would be their motivation? Would those with power somehow be enlightened by new philanthropy? Would they feel very noble by doing so? Have noble feelings ever fed people? Barber says: "If then technology is to make a political difference, it is the politics that will first have to be changed".

According to one participant, Douglas Schuler, who runs a city network in Seattle, USA, in teledemocracy the possibility to **participate in agenda setting** is the major component and new asset. Using the Net, it is easy to find other people who share one's view, start the discussion and set the agendas together for further debate and deliberation, also together with experts and decision-makers and thus, have an impact on issues at hand from the very beginning.

3.3. Deliberative Democracy

A dictionary definition of "to deliberate" is: To consider carefully and at length; To consider reasons and arguments so as to reach a decision; To think about or consider carefully. Dr. Barber argues in his book "Strong democracy" (1984) that participatory democracy means, not only "**the right to speak**" but also, and specifically, "**the right to be heard**". This I think can be considered as one of the necessary conditions for participatory democracy.

Professor Christa Slaton, who describes the development of democracy in the USA in her book: Televote (1992) elaborates later after the Munich conference about the contents and concept of deliberative democracy. She explains that "there is a debate in the USA about what deliberative democracy is. When Vince Campbell (1974) developed Televote in the 1970s and we (Slaton and her team) revised it in 1978, we said we were obtaining informed and deliberated public opinion. What we meant by deliberated is that people were given facts, arguments, and options and were encouraged to talk with others about the topic. We asked them to take some time to think about it and then give us their responses. We believe that **access to information, discussion with others, and time to think add up to deliberation**".

3.4.   Teledemocracy & Direct Democracy

Teledemocracy means the use of modern information and communications technology (ICT) as instruments to empower the people of a democracy to help set agendas, establish priorities, make important policies and participate in their implementation. In a word, true teledemocracy is the use of ICT to give the public leverage in self-governance. Put another way, it is the use of ICT to help transform modern representative democracies into more participatory democracies.

In systems terms teledemocracy is a complex, dynamic, non-linear and multivariate phenomenon. That is why it should be emphasized that there is no "one truth" or "right way" to develop teledemocracy but that many peoples' initiatives and personal understanding are necessary elements of the process. A lively interaction between development ideas and viewpoints is essential to produce a truly democratic information society that is most likely to produce the greatest benefits for the broadest base of that society.

How can information networks be used for transforming the decision-making processes for the new citizen's society? To start with, it is necessary to ask how new ICT can be exploited to serve the transformation of the decision-making processes. The transformation actually means three major systematic and organizational changes, namely **opening, networking and user-pull**. The aim is a **winwin decision-making strategy**, which is based on "all parties win" instead of the now commonly used zero-sum game.

What does the opening of decision-making mean? It consists of increasing interaction between the parties concerned and change of the total societal case handling process so, that the initial phase, the agenda setting and the preparatory phase are handled in open arenas. Basically it means a paradigm shift of participation, a change in regard of citizen as a proactive societal actor. Thus it will decentralize decision-making power and empower the citizens.

Networking the decision-making presupposes that the opening development approach is adopted. The decision processes are then moved to local arenas and an interactive dialogue throughout the processes is conducted. The aim is to build a holistic view and insight as an interactive process jointly between the nodes of the societal networks and a winwin strategy is followed. The actors must rethink the networked actions and task allocation and form new codes of conduct. The process needs new understanding of actors' rights and obligations and proper exploitation of the ICT.

User-pull concept means that the development and implementation processes of ICT must be user-pulled instead of technology pushed. Technology has been developed mostly by the technology's own development pressures and challenges whereas the user needs and user's views on what should be developed and what for and how are not discussed. The development should be driven by the needs of people using the products and services.

All in all, all these methods described above lead to the conclusion that **teledemocracy is one model for deliberative democracy.**

3.5. Porous Decision-making

In the following figure 2. there is the porous decision-making model described. Porous is another way to describe that the ordinary governmental decision-making procedure can be opened and networked so that citizens have access to the process all the way through the case life cycle and that the process is porous in the way that information "leaks" to and from between citizens and administrative decision-makers. Thus it is possible to reform and eventually to transform the current decision-making model. Today, the citizen only has two alternatives, either approve the decision or make official complaint through conventional bureaucracy.
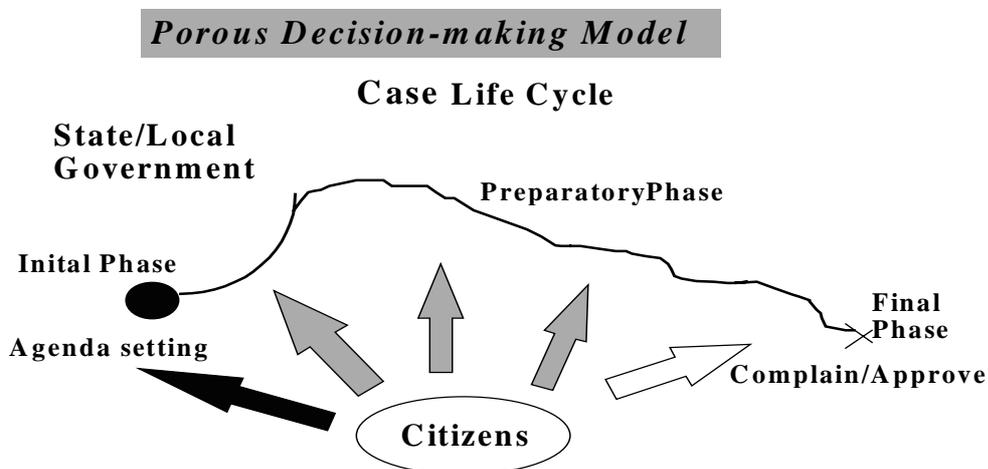
Figure 2. Porous Decision-making

4. DELIBERATIVE & PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Some scientists are wary in using the participatory concept, since it has the undertone of allowing someone to participate into a process that one has not the right to by default. But this cannot be the case. The decision power on a person's own life already exists because of her/his citizen constitutional rights, so that every citizen owns a certain amount of sovereign decision power by default. Representative democracy actually "collects individual decision power units to a cluster and transfers it over to a representative after the result of a voting process".

A very basic understanding of citizen freedom is, that this collection/transfer is executed **on a voluntary base through a set of mutually agreed rules.** This is not always true even in the most "liberal democracies " today. One indication is that for example voting is considered in Finland as a duty instead of as a right. Another is, that citizens and political decision-makers have lost contact with each other. Citizens do not find ways to or they do not believe they can influence any political process, and politicians, once given the "cluster of decision power units of certain citizens", do not reflect the needs of those citizens in the decision-making processes. There remains the eternal question: what or who does a representative decision-maker actually represent?

Referring to the reasoning above, I would prefer the deliberative democracy to be used instead of participatory. Professor Slaton goes on in explaining the US debate on deliberative democracy: "Then there were foundations and academics that came up with models of face-to-face discussions that argued that it is not deliberated opinion unless those giving their opinions are meeting face-to-face. It is the anti-technology crowd that argues the only way to advance democracy is to build community through face-to-face meetings. Professor James Fishkin wrote a book a few years ago called Democracy and Deliberation (1991). In that book he argued that for an opinion to be deliberated, persons have to meet face-to-face with others who disagree with them. **The personal interaction is where the deliberation comes in**".

Slaton explains further: "While I think there is great merit in face-to-face interaction, I maintain that deliberation can occur without face-to-face. Technology has some advantages at times over face-to-face. It is sometimes less intimidating, sometimes it is more equalizing in that a person's thoughts are what counts (not one's

dress, looks, ability to speak well, gender, race, etc.). I prefer not to take a stand that one is better than the other is (face-to-face vs. utilizing technology in the privacy of one's home). Both have advantages and weaknesses. But I run up against what I believe are elitists who claim their method is superior and the only way to go. I think they do not recognize or understand the power differential in face-to-face settings between men and women or between rich and poor or between the highly educated and the poorly educated. One may have equal opportunity to speak but does one have equal chance of being heard? (see Barber 1984). I just came from a conference that had 50% women speaking. Yet when questions were raised or comments were directed towards the speakers from the audience, the women speakers were virtually ignored. It reminded me of Keskinen (the author) on the panel with the group of German men in the Munich Conference. She had important information to share - knowledge they did not have and needed, yet they ignored her. The moderator did nothing to draw more information from her. So I think we glamorize too much what is accomplished in some face-to-face situations". Based upon this reasoning I also think it is important not to rely on one method of interaction alone but use different methods and thus give room for different personal preferences.

5.   DECISION METHODS

The development of methodology for deliberative decision-making has been slow and sporadic. In representative democracy the methods have been **the consensus and bargaining in addition to coercion.**

Professor Slaton's book Televote has inspired for new methods replacing or complementing the **consensus method.** For a long time now, representative democracy has been based on efforts to reach a consensus. This has many times in practice meant futile yes/no-debate or bargaining: "let's do according to your liking here, and then according to my liking there".

Consensus building however, is not the only method for trying to reach common understanding and decisions. I especially favour the idea of winwin method, where interactive dialogue is used for building new understanding and new ideas for how to make decisions where all actors concerned can win, in other words, the idea of a win-win method that can be described as a "both/and method replacing the either/or method".

In a **winwin method**, the discussions and interaction between different actors will mean, that the original dispute will **evolve** to something other, and actors participating would learn new things about the other actors and would be able to create new innovative alternatives for solutions. In such a process it can happen, that more than one alternative can be chosen - this would mean getting rid of "right or wrong" debate and accepting the approach that "this and that and even that one over there" alternatives are possible at the same time. The winwin based decision method can thus be called evolutionary. This is what Hazel Henderson describes in her book: Building a Win-win world (1996).

Slaton describes yet another process called **Problem/Possibility Focuser** in her Televote. There, the process does not strive for consensus, but instead seeks to clarify the agreements and disagreements surrounding a specific issue, where the aim is to develop ideas to settle disagreements. In futures research, there are similar processual methods, for instance **Futures Workshop,** created by Robert Jungk (1987), where the idea of finding alternative ways of settling disputes and forming new solutions is pursued by interactive groups of people. The main aim is to create new future images in a winwin fashion to ensure that different values could be taken into account when future actions are planned.

6. IDEAL DELIBERATIVE PROCESS

Professor Jim Dator (1979) has reviewed a vast amount of futures studies literature in the 1970s and synthesized four distinct futures into which all that literature fit: 1. Decline and Collapse, 2. the Disciplined Society, 3. Continued Growth and 4. the Transformational Society. These are further discussed in Becker (1986). Dator prefers the fourth scenario, the Transformation Society, which is an evolutionary process, deliberately dynamic, forever in a state of change. Becker explains that at the heart of this scenario is technology. It will be a de-massified (targeted) individualized society wherein information is a key commodity and is available to all. This is what we today call as the **information society**. In this scenario it is expected that technologies designed to facilitate citizen participation in governmental decision-making will steadily evolve, as well as the nature of the government itself. Becker concludes then: "Citizens could have total access to the same information which their representatives use to make law, accessing it through home or community computers.

Through this information, as well as citizen- and government-produced television programming and community discussion groups, citizens might formulate their options and opinions on laws and policies, and vote on regular basis. - In this final scenario, teledemocracy and the future are one."

6.1. Ideal Decision-making Models

In the following I will characterize how the ideal deliberative and direct democracy combined with the representative democracy could work. It is of course necessary in practice to follow an evolutionary path in democracy development like for instance presented in figure 1. There are naturally various practical actions that can be taken but the ideal democratic society would work on the following strategies:

- The citizens set the values, aims and joint codes of conduct together in a process that aims to multivalued winwin-solutions instead of a zerosum -game.
- The citizens set agendas, make initiatives, take care of the preparatory phase of the matters at hand according to their joint prioritization, and make the decisions together.

- Citizens' arenas steer the national and local development, study and organize studies for experts on subjects of their own choice and select the actors who carry out the decisions (task allocation).
- Citizens' needs will be brought into the open for further processing by properly exploiting the best technology of ICT.

In addition, citizens need to discuss, innovate and decide on various issues on the development, like what kind of matters and affairs need representational processes and to what degree can the individual citizen give away her/his citizens decision and participation rights? What kind of matters need direct/deliberative democracy? What kind of matters need several types of democracy interactively? How can citizens choose their degree and methods of participation in practice? Will the passive citizens have the same rights and how will these be ensured? What methods and processes are needed for enabling winwin-solutions?

6.2.   Example: Referendum

As an example of what the various transitional phases of democracy could mean I will elaborate the common case of referendum. In the following Table the phases of a referendum process are categorized.

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Phase 6	Phase 7
Agenda setting: about what will the opinion poll be organized? What for? The aim: binding or recom-mendatory?	What will be asked? Background research and results disseminated, dialogues, discussions, and learning processes, developing the alternatives needed for the Phase 3.	What are the alternatives for the referendum?	What are the methods used in referendum? Technical solutions, alternative tools for opinion giving?	Referendum process	Presenting and dissemi-nating the results, public dialogues and debates	Decisions based on the results, other actions or recursion starting from Phase 1.

The questions here are then: where do the citizens participate? How? Who will co-ordinate the processes? In the case of deliberative and direct democracy citizens will participate through all phases starting from Phase 1. In participatory democracy they will participate in Phases 2 and 5 and 6 and in representative democracy only in Phase 5.

7.   SUMMARY

Development of democracy has throughout the history been from "the power of few" to "the power of many", from oligarchy to pantocracy/policracy. The overall systematic change seems to be well described by the bifurcation curve known in the theory of chaos. Chaotic processes are not without order, however, there is rather the question of a new, not preordained order to be found in such processes (see for example Gleick 1987). This is but only one illustration of democracy development. Slaton has used the analogy of quantum theory in her democracy development descriptions. **Democracy is an evolutionary process, not a steady state system.** Democracy in any society is a life long learning process for all citizens in constant interaction with the process environment, and thus it is never "ready".

The liberty of agenda setting (see figure 2: Porous decision making) is probably the most difficult part of the decision-making procedure, because political issues to be handled within any democracy are initiated by the politicians and governmental procedures. **The enhanced deliberative decision-making throughout the case handling process is easier to be motivated if it is realized that the wider dedication of citizens to an issue is reached the easier it is to get the actual decision to be approved by the citizens.** Even here however there is a deep gap and lack of trust still existing between politicians and citizens - politicians think that citizens are ignorant and citizens cannot see how they could participate and how their opinion could be made heard and taken into consideration by the politicians. **So in the end what we need is the interplay of two processes: one - the desire and motivation to change and two - the appropriate tools for information creation, value and knowledge base building and interactive communications.**

Ultimately, it can be concluded that information networks have vast potential for aiding citizens to realize critical political transformations - not just reforms. This will mean a re-distribution of political power and "empowering of citizens" - the coming of a new form of a citizens' society, one where the ordinary citizen can play a major role in helping decide in what kind of society he/she should live now and in the future.

Actually what we are facing now is a paradigm shift for democratic decision-making, that is originated from the global challenges of sustainable development, unemployment and other major social problems and it can be stated as follows:

> *"Humanity cannot make the sweeping change that are required for a sustainable future (for example in consumption patterns, energy and transportation policies, the redesign of communities, international relations and much more) <u>without a dramatic increase in the intensity and quality of human communications".</u>*

In summary, a new understanding should dawn that citizens can and should take an active role in socio-political decision-making in order to make life better for themselves and their communities. This can be done by employing more of the new electronic means at citizens' disposal. Another major message is that the technology is already there - and is rapidly getting easier to use for everyone to capture, employ and develop, if they want to use it. But one should remember that **the structures, technologies or institutions do not make decisions, human beings do.** We citizens live in our communities, we must decide where to aim and what kind of futures to pursue and work for. New ways of innovative thinking is therefore called for, but it is as J. Maynard Keynes has said:

> *"The difficulty lies not in new ideas, but in escaping from old ones".*

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ABSTRACT
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