A survey of French Local e-Democracy

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Abstract

Since the end of last century, the Internet has shown it is a different media, a media of citizen journalists. This paper surveys e-democractic tools used at local level in France in order to see how the Internet can change our democracy and people's participation. It describes the official tools provided by municipalities or administrations and citizens' tools, like blogs, which become more and more important in today democratic debate. It analyses how they help for more transparency, accountability and participation, which might lead to define new democratic rules.

1   Introduction

The Internet provides new ways to build a more efficient democracy. This sentence is common and not new since it has been applied to most new technologies especially media. Ten years ago, the specificity of the Internet was still not clear. One could read that *"while the Net will certainly change the informational environment of individuals, it will likely not alter their overall interest in public affairs"* (Bimber 1998). The fact that the Internet is the first mass media open for writing to all citizens at almost no cost did not seem to be enough to make things different.

A few years later, the feeling changed. The Internet became *"the mother of all the selective media"* (Bimber 2003) and therefore leads/led to balkanisation and polarisation of public opinion (Sunstein 2001). For others it provided/s structures of communication of all kind, centralised or not, from broad social networks to narrow communities (Bimber 2005). The Internet's specificity and its influence on the political environment seems more obvious. Today the presidential candidates in the US, yesterday in France, massively use the Internet and citizens participate through blogs or dedicated web sites.

Therefore the Internet, this new kind of media, changed the political environment. However does it mean it can make people change their vote or their political ideas? Bimber (1998) analysing the growth of television and the expansion of education during the second half of the twentieth century, concludes that *"there appears to be no connexion between information and political engagement, as measured by knowledge about politics, voting or sophistication"*. But the Internet is not only information, it is also participation (Benkler 2006, Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery 2007).

In this article we show how today the Internet is part of local democracy in France. First we focus on municipalities, see how they use the Internet, which e-democracy tools they propose and how efficient they are. Then we look at state administrations working at local level and grassroots web sites, blogs. The second part focuses on features of e-democracy, transparency, accountability and participation, to see how things are in France and what is or may be done to improve the e-democratic process. This leads to choose which kind of democratic system should be promoted on the Internet (and in our society).

2   Current state

When we talk about local e-democracy we think about a more direct democracy than the usual local democracy, something like a continual town meeting on the Internet. It implies to make information, communication and participation more accessible, communication including feed back and participation including decision making process . For that, official web sites of cities seem to be the right place to build an e-democracy. But today, none offer all the three features expected, especially none offer a legal frame making citizen participation in public policy decision-making effective.

2.1   What cities do

According to the French registry AFNIC, 23% of the 34,000 municipalities in France have registered their domain name under the top level domain `.fr`. If we restrict to the municipalities of more than 2,000 inhabitants, then 55% of them have their domain name under `.fr` (AFNIC - INT 2007). Since some municipalities have registered their domain name under other generic top level domains, like `.org`, these percentages are minima. However if we restrict to the 57 cities of 100,000 or more inhabitants, including the suburb, then all of them have their domain name under `.fr`.

If all the municipalities on the Internet have a web site, uses are quite different. Most of them just provide information on tourism, local administrations, associations, entertainment, sport...making easier to fetch the information (first feature). However only a small part of them also use their web site to facilitate the communication by setting up interfaces like chat, forum, open letter or blog or by providing open space to the citizens like Web TV or Web radio (second feature). The only common interface is a form or an e-mail address to join the administration.

In order to find how much e-democracy has been done and which tools are efficient, we focuse on the most involved cities, members of the association "Villes Internet" dedicated to reduce the digital divide and to promote local e-democracy. Each year "Villes Internet" labels cities with @ according to these goals. In 2007, 14 cities received 5 @, 27 got 4 @, 72 got 3 @, 77 got 2 @ and 46 got 1 @. Among these cities, 17 have more than 100,000 inhabitants and 80 have between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. The labels are given as much for reducing the digital divide than for the promotion of e-democracy which explains why the e-democratic tools in table 1 are so different among the 5 @ cities.

Let's first focus on these tools. All the cities in table 1 have an official newspaper sent by postal mail to the inhabitants and available on their web site. This is usual mayor's propaganda seen in most cities in France, however it is a source of democracy since it provides local information that may push to react. The point is how to react? We must admit there are very few city web sites that offer such an opportunity and when they do so, by providing a forum or a blog, almost no one uses them. People are not used to have an agora. Protestations and comments are done through mail, petitions, associations or political parties. According to the civil servant of Agen in charge of ICT, it is very difficult to make people participating. Even suggesting people participating to town meetings to continue their debates on forums did not help.

The most active forum seems to be at Ivry sur Seine, in the close suburb of Paris. It is far from being an active forum according the Internet standards, it had 169 messages sent by 29 members and read by more than 50,000 visitors between May 2007 and January 2008. Among the active members, the interventions of the first alderman gives real credibility to the forum. It can be noticed that his messages/answers are expected. The mayor adds another reason of success: the effort made by the city to reduce the digital divide by giving free access to the Internet and formation centers (Gosnat 2006). However the forum, called officially the seventh district, closed in January until the municipal elections in March with the reason: "*The forum cannot be a place for the municipal campaign*"...

City	population	e-Democracy tools
Agen	30,000	Council meeting minutes Newsletter Forum without answer from representatives Poll Chat with the mayor
Argentan	16,600	Newsletter Blog with comments
Blanquefort	14,000	Council meeting minutes (no archive) Newsletter Forum with answers from representatives Open Web TV Blog (no comment)
Chambly	9,100	Council meeting minutes Newsletter Poll Chat with the mayor
Epinal	35,800	Council meeting minutes (no archive) Newsletter
Faches-Thumesnil	15,900	Council meeting minutes (no archive) Newsletter Web TV Possibility to comment all the pages of the web site (moderated). Answers from public servants.
Gluiras	350	Council meeting minutes Newsletter Forum (empty and moderated)
Ivry sur Seine	56,400	Council meeting minutes Newsletter Forums with answers from representatives Poll
Le Havre	183,900	Council meeting minutes Newsletter Possibility to ask public questions from all the pages
Lormont	21,300	Newsletter
Metz	429,600	Council meeting minutes Newsletter
Parthenay	10,500	Council meeting minutes Newsletter Forum dedicated to local projects (2 projects, no comment)
Vandœuvre-lès-Nancy	34,400	Newsletter Link to an open e-newspaper. There is no political article Open Web TV
Vannes	51,800	Council meeting minutes Newsletter Closed and empty forum

Table 1: E-democracy tools of the 5 @ cities

An original interface of communication has been set up by the city of Faches-Thumesnil where each page of the web site can be extended by comments like a blog. It has the main advantage of gathering the messages on the same topic. However it leads more to a Question/Answer scheme with the administration than to debates with the representatives. The city of Le Havre has a similar system where each main section of the web site has a Question/Answer page.

The blog, so often used by politicians to promote their ideas, are unusual on official web sites and when they exist, they arouse almost no reaction. The mayor of Blanquefort who used blogs to follow local projects had to admit the failure of this tool on his city web site. He noticed that in case of trouble people prefer to run their own blog to criticise instead of using the city one (Feltesse 2007).

Among the other tools, Web TVs, open or not, are not used to make politics but to show events, associations, everyday life. The same applies to the open newspaper of Vandœuvre-lès-Nancy pubished by the association "Place Publique Locale" which explicitly says that this newspaper should not be used to promote political ideas.

Chats with mayors are more political, more focused on the city affairs. Unlike the forum, they succeed to mobilise citizens who know they will get answers from the chief magistrate of the city. Unfortunately these meetings are irregular.

At last, opinion polls, by definition feed back tools, are not usable today. Samples of the population are made by whoever wishes to participate which makes impossible to estimate who participates especially on the Internet where the word of mouth is so efficient. Without identification, polls cannot be accurate and should only be seen as toys for fun.

2.2   Outside municipal web sites

If french municipal web sites are spaces to fetch information, they are not yet communication interfaces with the representatives. On a higher level, the state set up interfaces to debate. The first one, `forum.gouv.fr` ask citizens to debate on topics suggested by ministers with a view to next law proposals. For each forum documents and sometimes a video of the minister introduce the topic and a deadline is set up. At the end, the administration in charge of the forum writes a synthesis and publishes it on the web site. The participation is much higher than on city forums. In three months, the forum dedicated to the smoking ban in public spaces published 8,200 messages. Less explosive topics can expect a thousand messages a month. Unfortunately this success does not imply efficiency. Since there is no internal structure in the forum, messages are often written without taking into account the other ones which leads to repetitions and reduce the possibility of constructive argumentations.

The second official web-forum is very different. Created by an environmentalism law voted in 95, the "Commission nationale du débat public" organises debates when a large project might affect the environment. This state organisation is not web centric, it uses usual reports, expertises, counter-expertises, live local debates... the web site, `www.debatpublic.fr`, supporting the action by storing all the documents sent by the stakeholders and the meeting agenda. There is no web-forum but it is possible to send documents or messages to the organisation for publication. Hence citizens, officials, representatives, professionals send their opinion in their name. Anonymous messages are rare unlike in `forum.gouv.fr` where they are the majority.

These two examples of communication imply a lot of administrative work. However a forum without work of synthesis, without organisation and preparation can hardly give useful results. With just a web-forum, one cannot expect much more than ideas and an oriented feeling of the population.

If municipal web sites do not offer debate spaces, the Internet gives citizens opportunities to express their ideas and they use them. It started with web sites built by associations or individuals and continue now with political blogs. One of the oldest and most known of the opposition's web site, now a blog, is `www.monputeaux.com`, many times suited by the mayor without success. The determination of the mayor to close this web site contributed to its popularity, gave a bad image of democracy in this town and transformed a blogger into a candidate. Hopefully, this is an extreme case and opposition

web sites or blogs exist in many cities without any trouble. There exist also pure political blogs, not as oriented as opposition ones, where analysis and debates are the main features. During the last presidential elections, in 2007, `www.observatoire-presidentielle.fr` referenced more than 2,000 political blogs, most of them being politicians or parties' one, only 164 being "analysts" ones. According to one of the most popular "analysts", Versac, this ratio is not representative since grassroots political blogs are a large majority. As a matter of fact, `wikio.fr` has only a fifth of politicians' or parties' blogs in its top 100 political blogs. Therefore we can estimate at 10,000 the number of political blogs for the last presidential elections. A year after, with the help of the municipal elections, we can expect this number to have increased. According to Google, there are today 33,864 french blogs with the word "politique" in their title. In September 2005, Google found only 1,251 answers for the same criteria (Greffet 2005).

Beside blogs, open newspapers centralise articles from whoever wants as long as they are accepted by the editorial board. Many articles come from blogs, other from web sites, other are written for the newspaper. Come4news, `www.come4news.com`, declares to have close to 1 million visits a month. According to Wikipedia, Agoravox, `www.agoravox.fr`, has more than 10,000 citizen journalists. If the political weight of this newspaper is not known, nor is the weight of blogs, they are for sure sources of buzz. In February 2007, Google News France had 766 articles from Agoravox and 1 thousand from Come4News. They can also be a source for national newspapers. In January, two months before the municipal elections, Le Monde published an article on a strange council meeting in Asnières citing an article of Agoravox and its videos (Zilbertin 2008). It is difficult to imagine that the article of Agaravox is not going to influence the elections in Asnières.

The videos uploaded on YouTube, Dailymotion and others are also ingredients of the democratic debate. Easier to "read" than articles, they can reach audiences difficult to reach for articles. The video of Nicolas Sarkozy "drunk" at G8 summit has been seen more than 15 millions times in less than 10 days, much more than any French evening news on TV (Fouetillou 2007). Used as catch-line, they can start democratic debates as it has been done in Asnières. And of course, they are also used by candidates. According to Google, there are 22,000 videos on Dailymotion for the next municipal elections and 12,900 on YouTube.

Another category of citizen journalism worth to be notified since it brings something new for citizens: tools for accountability. This is different than previous web sites as these web sites provide only neutral information, facts. Mon député, `www.mon-depute.com` records all the votes of the MP since 1997 and allows to check each vote of each MP. Votons, `www.votons.info` registers the election platforms of candidates, today for municipal elections. It then allows to compare and, for past elections, to remember, see `presidentielle2007.votons.info`. Remembrance then leads to check if election promises are kept or broken, which is done for the current French president on `www.observatoire-politique.fr`.

3   Improving e-democracy

All these tools can contribute to more democracy. They can increase transparency, accountability and participation. They offer new ways of communication, they allow small budget to exist. However, they are still used by a minority, they face opposition from politicians when they open the door to more participation, they push to rethink our representative democracy.

The main progress in last 10 years is transparency. City council meeting minutes are the big achievement since they open the doors of something mostly unknown even if public. Few cities provide also videos and/or broadcast of the council meetings. Videos should not replace minutes but have some advantages: they give a good feeling of how is ruled the city, they make politics closer to citizen and, according to a mayor, they increase the representatives' presence. Cities also use the Internet to push administrative information, project, events, budget...However there is no legal rule on what to publish on the Internet and for how long. For example, each school has do define a pedagogical plan for three years and to send it to its ministry. One could think it would be interesting for schools to exchange their pedagogical plan and theirs experiences, for parents to know what schools do. No: no rule asks to publish plans and schools prefer not to do it. This lack of transparency is not unique,

administrations, organisations are not used to share information even if paid by public funds. It is also common to see copyright of city web site forbidding to copy anything without authorisation or to do deep links (links not on the home page). The feeling that information is valuable and that keeping it means power, is still strong in French public administration.

However some sources of information are provided by state organisations in charge of local affairs. One of the most important at cities level is "La cours des comptes", France's National Audit Office, which has the mission, among others, to check cities' accounting and whether public funds have been well employed. One can understand how important their reports for citizens and mayors are and why their publication on the Internet changes things. Unfortunately, not all state organisation publish on the Internet, among them French courts.

Accountability is seen as an important feature of e-democracy. On that point the network provides two important features: a huge memory and data mining. The huge memory is named Google or Wayback Machine, `www.archive.org`, the former to find something, the latter to see a web site as it was years ago. The second feature is more for hackers, it makes possible for an individual to build databases by parsing web sites or any available documents. Then the database is used, according to the data extracted, to give a useful and usable information. The web site `mondepute.free.fr` cited above is an example of this feature. Of course, administrations have all that is needed to make such tools and they do so sometimes. We can see all the interventions, amendments, law proposals of the MP for the current term on the web site of the French parliament. The city of Paris keeps on its web site all the press releases and press kits of each alderman. By the time, one can hope that smaller administrations will provide such tools, especially since information is more and more present and makes these tools easier to create. Then with efficient accountability tools, citizens may use them to sanction politicians and therefore increase their participation in elections.

Participation is the main reason why politicians are willing to push for e-democracy. Our western democracies suffer a lack of participation in politics and in elections. In France abstention climbed up to 33% for the last municipal elections, 40% for general elections and more than 55% for European elections. The only exception being the last presidential elections with 16% of abstention (SOFRES 2007). Therefore any innovation that might increase participation is welcome. In (Coleman & Norris 2005), participants cite barriers to participation and see no reasons why e-democracy or e-government should remove them. Seaton suggests that *"People will want to participate if they understand how they can contribute to the political process, and believe that their contribution will be taken seriously"*. The experience of city forums goes in that direction: forums are more active where cities worked to reduce the digital divide and representatives participate in the forum. But for Michel Briand, alderman in charge of ICT and participative democracy in Brest, this will not be enough for large parts of the population. His finding is that there is no possible e-democracy with the rich and educated Internet users only. Therefore he works to give the keys of the Internet to low-income and low-educated groups using existing people networks. Next, he uses the Internet to build more social ties by calling for projects and publishing all the proposals and project reports in order to show the new incomers how to proceed. At the end he expects people will feel at ease enough with the administration and the Internet to start to participate (Briand 2007).

In this scheme, rules are well defined and transparency is mandatory. Hence anyone can evaluate the work done by different projects and check if subsidies have been well employed. Rules could also be defined to force the administration and the representatives to take citizen contributions seriously. E-petitions are a way to do so, the rule being that any petition with more than X signatures should be discussed during the next city council meeting, like for instance at the 10 Downing Street E-petitions or Scottish Parliament e-Petitions. For more efficiency, citizens signing petitions could be identified, which leads to problems of authentication.

4 Conclusion

Large French municipalities have their web site and provide information. The level of information change largely according to the involvement of the mayor in e-democracy and his/her democratic level.

Most of them propose a city newspaper, some council meeting minutes or city projects. The more involved set up communication interfaces with citizens: blogs, chats, forums. Experience has shown that such interfaces are more popular when representatives participate and citizens are familiar with the Internet. However more work has to be done to make communication more accessible to reach significant participation. Some state administrations also provide local information, like city audits, which can change local elections.

In the meantime citizens make their own democratic networks, mainly with blogs. In Puteaux, a blogger candidates for mayor with real chances. DailyMotion and YouTube are more and more present, dozens of thousands of videos related to the March municipal elections have been uploaded by candidates and citizens. Some grassroots tools for accountability have been made.

Slowly a real framework of e-democracy arises. It is still too recent to make real changes in French democracy. However, some doors are open, the question being what do we want to find behind the door? The actual trend is participative democracy which fits well the Internet and vice versa. However as many authors have already written, citizens' participation in not only driven by information availability but also by motivation and capacity to understand many complex issues (Bimber 1998). Therefore participative democracy can work if few citizens, the motivated ones, can alert the majority in case of need and if a system, petitions, allows the majority alerted to gives its feeling according the warnings given. This is the contestatory democracy promoted by Pettit (1999) and considered as the best candidate for e-democracy by van den Hoven (2005). It seems today that some mayors in France are favorable enough to e-democracy to run experiments in these directions.

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