1. What does Internet Governance mean?

One of the generally accepted definitions would say that Internet Governance is the development and application by governments, the private sector, and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet. The topic I'm mostly interested in is, however, what are the exact implications of this term in the decision-making processes and the way it affects community's life in specific regions as a whole.

Nowadays, e-Democracy has become a "buzz-word" used by the media to express the notion of governments somehow "moving onto" the Internet. The actual concept of e-Democracy, however, covers a very broad field from direct democracy to online public engagement in policy deliberation [Coleman, S., Gøtze 2001]. Most developed democracies have some kind of e-Democracy programme, and politicians appear to be putting a lot of faith into the fact that taking offline processes online can somehow help undermine the lack of confidence there is today in the political system [Coleman, S., Gøtze 2001].

For instance, political organizations are beginning to wake up to the Internet in the way that the business world did a number of years ago. They are spending more and more on their online presences and communities in order to cost-effectively convey their message to a community estimated at over 500 million users worldwide.

Some experts argue that the Internet and virtual communication can be used to great effect to combat real-world problems, and that given the right knowledge and expertise the Internet can be used constructively by anyone to promote their point of view. Despite this, one of the most effective tools for doing this in an "Internet Governance era", i.e. Internet Campaigning, remains on the fringes of political debate, and examples of successful online campaigning are seen as curiosities rather than as a threat to the establishment.

2. Online Campaigns: A Fad or a Breakthrough?

Online campaigns are seen by some as the beginning of a move away from our current political system into a system of direct democracy, where people no longer elect representatives to decide what they believe. Others believe that online campaigning is a waste of effort and has to date only been sustained by media hype. Still others believe that online campaigning is very dangerous and can remove the citizen even further away from the political decision making process.

The true potential of the Internet is clearly not yet understood. More concerning is that the knowledge of how to run an online campaign is only understood by a small minority of the population. The field is moving incredibly rapidly, and it only through keeping up to date and examining what is being done today that it will be possible to draw any meaningful conclusions. Use of the Internet as part of the political process is a very topical issue in both the fields of politics and Computer Science.
Despite these developments there has been little research into whether the Internet will be able to empower previously disconnected citizens, linking them back into the political process. Online

campaigning is still in its infancy, particularly when compared to the much larger efforts into top-down solutions of e-government which largely focus on efficiency rather than empowerment.

Increasingly individuals and organizations are beginning to make use of the networks of people accessible over the Internet to promote their own political goals. Initial campaigning was carried out by organizations whose supporters matched the traditional demographics of the Internet: white, male, educated and middle-class. Today in many countries over fifty percent of the population accesses the Internet on a frequent basis. The potential of such a large global network of supporters is only just beginning to be recognized by its members, and as interactive television is phased in throughout Europe and North America, this potential will grow further.

3. No Revolutions

The Internet will not in itself enable ordinary citizens to be politically empowered in that way that many utopians had hoped. Studies suggest that the Internet will be secondary to forms of mass-broadcast media such as the television and newspapers for some time. The initial optimism surrounding the Internet was in the context of a no-longer existent world of co-operation and opportunity. Since then the Internet has been commercialized, like other media capable of broadcasting, the pioneering spirit of grass-roots led non-profit initiatives almost lost.

Despite these disappointments for the Internet's early activists, a new generation is awakening to the Internet and the practical opportunities it offers. Local and global activists are rallying together, using the Internet for managing and organizing themselves, as well as advertising their cause and concerns to an increasingly demographically diverse population. Unlike earlier activists today's generation do not have the Internet to themselves. Corporations, governments and political parties have also awoken to the Internet's potential, and in many cases appear to be gaining the upper-hand against activists thanks to their huge resources.

4. Conclusions

Historically individuals have shown a remarkable ability to be years ahead of the larger institutions in making use of new technology. In some cases this is happening already. Whether the Internet will eventually favor those inside or outside of the establishment is a battle that is still to be won. By examining specific techniques used successfully and widely publishing that knowledge, the future researches should attempt to contribute to a new body of knowledge concerning online campaigning which is slowly building in magnitude.

One question that such forums as WSIS should address in its prospective studies is what individuals think of the Internet. Do they want the political system mobilizing online, or is it seen as yet another example of influence only being extended to those with the appropriate skills? A survey of people from a range of cultural and economic backgrounds will demonstrate the acceptance of the Internet and whether there is a desire amongst people to be able to express themselves to others over the Internet. If empowering citizens is considered the key objective this can only be achieved if the citizens themselves are going to feel empowered thanks to the new technology: whether or not this empowerment is actually technologically possible.

4. References

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