

# The Ethical Problem of Framing e-Government in Terms of e-Commerce

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses one aspect of the relationship that the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in business has with the use of ICT in government and administration. It argues that democracies rely on their ethical legitimacy and that framing e-Government and e-Democracy in commercial terms can jeopardise this legitimacy. For this purpose the paper distinguishes between e-Government as service delivery and e-Democracy as the more radical use of ICT for democratic deliberation and policy formulation. It argues that the commercial paradigm can support some of the moral values underpinning democracy but it can also have a negative effect on them by equating customers and citizens, by likening the political and the economic system and by promoting hidden agendas and ideologies. The conclusion argues that democratic decision makers need to pay attention to these relationships. Otherwise they not only endanger the success of e-Government and e-Democracy but may even threaten the basis of the moral legitimacy of democratic forms of government.

**Keywords:** e-Government, e-Democracy, e-Commerce, legitimacy, ethics, morality

## 1. Introduction

e-Government is a growth industry whose potential has been recognised by most of the big players in the hardware and software market from IBM to Microsoft. While the end of the dot.com boom seems to have taken the glamour out of information and communication technology (ICT), the fundamental advantages it offers to organisations are still the same. Quick communication, better access to information, shrinking transaction costs, or greater flexibility are just some of the more important ones. While many businesses and industries were quick to take on these advantages and move into e-business and e-Commerce, the same is not always true for government and public administration. Nevertheless, most industrialised societies have started down the road of the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in government and some have made considerable progress.

In many respects the development of e-Government seems to follow the example of e-Commerce. High level administrators or political leaders recognise the potential of a certain technology and decide to deploy it in their area of responsibility. Given that the systems as well as the vendors and their personnel are usually experienced in e-Commerce or e-business, similar systems are used in e-Government and similar processes are installed. Furthermore, the rhetoric of e-Government uses arguments and logic which stem from the business world. In many cases this happens deliberately and with the best of intention. The perceived weaknesses of democratic governments and administrations include a high level of bureaucracy, a duplication of efforts in departments that do not communicate

and a general sluggishness and lack of response. Given that businesses increasingly try to overcome these problems, to become agile competitors, the hope is that the use of the paradigm of business in government, which is transported through the medium of e-Government, will alleviate these problems.

This paper will evaluate this development from an ethical perspective. It will ask what the implications of the use of the commercial paradigm on e-Government will be by concentrating on the moral basis of democracy. The paper will start out by discussing the moral foundation of democracy and its links to ethics and a morality. It will then analyse the concept of e-Government and introduce the important distinction between e-Government as the technological delivery of administrative services and e-Democracy as the technological enhancement of primary democratic processes. From there the paper will proceed to take a look at e-Commerce and why it seems to be a suitable paradigm for e-Government. The use of this paradigm will then be analysed and especially the limits of its use will be discussed. The result of the discussion will be that e-Commerce is a legitimate paradigm in some respects because it stands for values such as efficiency gains or better distribution that are common to democracies. At the same time, business ideas can only represent democratic processes within relatively narrow limits. The central problem is that the conceptualisation of humans differs fundamentally between the business world and politics. In business people are most importantly consumers whereas in democracy, people are predominantly citizens. The danger of the commercial paradigm is that it implies that citizens can be reduced to consumers. This change of the conceptualisation

of humans creates a change from e-Democracy to e-Government, it excludes certain members from inclusion, and it generally affects the character of democracy. This, it will be argued, threatens the moral legitimacy of democracy which is the central basis of its acceptability and therefore of its success. The conclusion will therefore be that politicians as well as information systems professionals must make sure that they keep the sometimes fine line between business processes and political processes in mind in order to avoid a failure of the (political as well as technical) system and retain its legitimacy.

## **2. The ethics of democracy**

As it is the purpose of this paper to argue that the commercial paradigm can threaten the moral legitimacy of democracy we will have to clarify first what democracy is and how it is related to ethics. This section will therefore start with a review of some of the defining aspects of democracy in order to then establish its relationship with ethics and morality. It will end by briefly looking at some of the weaknesses of democracy.

### **2.1 The concept of democracy**

A look at the etymology of democracy shows that it literally means "rule of the people". It is the conceptual opposite of forms of government where single persons or minorities rule. While the idea of democracy, of the people governing themselves, may appear almost trivial to many citizens of Western democracies who never experienced another form of government, it is important to note that it is anything but trivial. It contains a number of implications and suppositions that need to be spelled out in order to understand the importance of ethics for democracy and also the conditions under which democracies can function and be stable.

One implication of democratic rule is that the will of the community is created bottom-up, that the individual members of society collaborate to determine what society does. Democracy is a formal process that leaves the outcome of the decision process mostly open. It only determines the external format necessary to make decisions. These decisions refer not only to actions but, more importantly, to intentions. That means that democracy is the process of collective forming of a political will as well as the way of realising this will (cf. Richardson 1999).

This implies that every member of society is recognised as a person, that the rights of all persons are equal, that the individual is protected from the arbitrariness of society. At the same time democracy stands for an attitude by individuals

that implies responsibility for the commonwealth, tolerance, and courage (cf. Söderbaum 2000; Hengsbach 1991). The very heart of democracy is the deliberative process that allows the forming of the political will. This is based on the idea that the members of the democratic society are willing and able to exchange ideas and arguments in such a way as to come to acceptable and legitimate majority decisions (Habermas 1998). Communication can thus be said to be the essence of democracy (Ricoeur 1991).

Another possible approach to democracy is to look at its purpose. The formal and functional description of democracy given above implies purposes but does not spell them out. One can, however, see democracy as a means to and end. The ends that democracy is supposed to realise could then be the safeguarding of internal peace and individual freedom (Hayek 1994).

These few short characterisations of democracy can not claim completeness. What they should be useful for, however, is to point us in the direction of the ethical basis of democracy, to show us why accepted moral rules and their ethical justifications are of central importance to the functioning of democracy.

### **2.2 The ethical basis of democracy**

There are different reasons why democracy is linked to ethics and morality. Maybe the most obvious one is that it is a system that distributes power. Power affects our moral rights and obligations, the way we can and should behave, and it is also of theoretical and reflective importance. The most important aspect of ethics and power in democracies is that democratic processes give power legitimacy. Power as the ability to make others do one's bidding is a necessary part of any community and it can only be held if the affected parties believe it to be justified and legitimate. In a post-metaphysical society the source of legitimacy of power can apparently only come from the assumption that democratic processes, albeit fallible, create the most reasonable results that can be expected (Habermas 1998). Power can always be misused but democracies seem to be better at avoiding or ending misuse than authoritarian forms of government (Küng 1997). Democracies are decentralised and this decentralisation allows reasonable local solutions (Beck 1986). The participation of individuals which is constitutive for democracies allows regulations which are acceptable to all (Kant 1992; Tocqueville 1998). In addition to the provision of a legitimate distribution and execution of power, strength of democracies is that they facilitate the change of power relationships in a peaceful and way.

Another link between ethics and democracy can be developed from the underlying anthropological assumptions. Democracy is based on a view of humans that is itself ethically charged. The citizen of democracy is modelled after the enlightenment idea of humans, as free, autonomous and moral agents. Democracy can only exist with this (sometimes counterfactual) view of its members. This anthropological view assumes moral values such as the fundamental equality of all citizens and it esteems the classical liberal individual as the basis of community.

Finally, democracy promises to deliver moral values to society as a whole by forming the autonomous individual through socialisation and education. Democracy requires and disseminates knowledge and it provides the court of public exchange for the creation of knowledge (cf. Rauch 1993). The institutions and members of democracy promise the achievement of progress in material, social, intellectual and many other respects. One important basis of this argument is the close link between democracy as a political framework and capitalism as the corresponding economic framework (Becker 1976; Friedman 1994). Many of the moral arguments supporting democracy can be found in a similar form for capitalism. Democracy and its emphasis on the individual is supposed to give people the skills and the desire to perform well economically and the aggregation of individual performance should lead to an improvement in general welfare. Only on the basis of a functioning economic system can wealth be redistributed to the needy which again strengthens the moral case for democracy (Rorty 1996). The combination of capitalism and democracy should not only increase welfare in individual states but also lead to an equalising effect between countries and, at least for those countries that participate, bring a generally high standard of living (Cohen 1996).

As another moral advantage, democracy is supposed to be peaceful. Since the sovereign is the people itself and the people (as opposed to the elites or aristocrats) suffer the most from a war, democracy is often depicted as intrinsically peaceful. Furthermore, war tends to disrupt commerce. Thus, the business people in democratic states, who have a strong political influence, are supposed to be peaceful (Tocqueville 1999).

### 2.3 Moral weaknesses of democracy

The last section may have struck the reader as overly optimistic and, in fact, democracy may not always display the moral advantages just

described. From the first start of democracy, there has always been the suspicion that it is nothing but the rule of mob (Aristoteles 1967). It has often been suspected that democracies are intrinsically instable, for different reasons. Rorty (1996) suspects that democracies require a high level of material well-being to function; that they cannot survive real hardship. Maybe even worse is the material emptiness of democracies. Plato (1973) believed that they have to disintegrate because they know no boundaries and until today it is open whether liberal democracies can provide humans with an idea of the "good life" which has always been central to ethical thought (Postman 1992).

There is the problem of theory and practice, the question whether democratic states can really live up to the expectations levelled at them. Experience tells us that the noble idea of free forming of the political will bottom-up may not work in practice. The view of humans that informs democracy will often not be displayed and reflected by democratic institutions. The welfare argument may be weak because experience shows that not everybody participates in the generation and sharing of wealth. Finally, it can even be argued that democracies are not peaceful but that they create perverse incentives which make them intrinsically more belligerent than autocratic regimes (Tocqueville 1999).

While we should thus take the moral advantages of democracy with a grain of salt, we should be aware that they have one central function. They legitimize the democratic form of government. Whether fact or fiction, the moral side of democracy allows us to distribute power and resources, to find collective solutions, to create a shared vision of the good life. All of this is never perfect. It can only work because the vast majority of the affected accept it as morally justified. Arguably, every form of government needs this sort of justification and democracy seems best suited to provide it in the modern world. Admittedly, these are strong assumptions and might lead to a lengthy debate on political theory and practice. I will not be able to dwell on them here and hope that the reader finds them sufficiently plausible to follow the rest of my argument which is based on the assumption that ethics and morality play an essential role in legitimizing democracy.

### 3. e-Government and e-Democracy

The "e-" in front of a noun usually denotes the use of ICT for the purposes that the noun traditionally stands for. E-commerce uses ICT for commercial purposes, e-learning uses ICT for education etc. Similarly, the term "e-Government" stands for the

use of ICT in the realm of government. Clearly, the area covered by the term "government" is immense and depends on the definition of government. In the widest sense it can stand for all of the activities by municipal, regional, or national governments and administration. It can also include activities of the legislative and judicial power. The word e-Government is often used in such a wide sense which can be problematic. In this paper we will distinguish between e-Government as the administrative use of ICT and e-Democracy as the use of ICT for genuine democratic purposes. This distinction is important because the use of the paradigm of business can hide or imply a shift from e-Democracy to e-Government and thereby threaten the legitimacy of the democratic form of government.

### **3.1 e-Government and service delivery**

E-government understood as the use of ICT for the purposes of the executive branch of government is advancing quickly and covering more and more areas in a geographic as well as thematic sense. For which purposes is ICT used by governments? The answer to this question depends on the type and particularities of government. Generally, there seems to be a trend to include as much as possible into e-Government. One can fundamentally distinguish between internal process of governments and external relationships where the latter can be divided into relationships with citizens or constituents and others, such as other governments or organisations. ICT can thus be used for purposes as different as internal data exchange for the streamlining of workflows or international development (Thompson 2003).

While e-Government could thus theoretically span a wide range of activities, it appears that governments and their bureaucracies have a strong tendency to favour activities that could broadly be described as service delivery. This is arguably the case because bureaucracies have the task of delivering services and because there is an intrinsic affinity between governments and ICT, which can also be called a technology of "command and control" (Postman 1992, 115). It is not possible to prove this point here but disregarding the reasons for the development one can easily find that a large number of publications about the topic of e-Government are concerned with service delivery. (For a plethora of examples cf. Bannister & Remenyi (eds.) 2003.)

Most of us have come across examples of this trend. Municipalities post local information on the Internet, tax returns can be done electronically, drivers licences can be applied for online etc. While this development is beneficial in many

respects it also seems to take away awareness from other applications of ICT, namely those that are directly linked to democratic processes, which we will call e-Democracy (Wastell 2003).

### **3.2 e-Democracy and the radicalisation of democratic processes**

While e-Government as service delivery is arguably the prominent face of the use of ICT in democratic institutions, there is another side, which is more interesting and which has the potential to radically change our understanding of democracy. We will call this side "e-Democracy" and it stands for the use of ICT for the purposes of democratic deliberation and policy formulation. One can often find the idea that ICT and specifically the Internet are inherently democratic technologies. The reasoning is that "(1) Democracy means power in the hands of individuals (the many); (2) information is power; (3) the Internet makes vast quantities of information available to individuals; (4) therefore, the Internet is democratic" (Johnson 2001, 211; cf. Johnson 2000). This democratic promise was one of the main motivators for the investment in Internet technologies by government, most notably the Internet backbones in the USA (Gore 1995). One should note that this inherent democratic character of Internet technology is often used as a moral argument to support its development and implementation (cf. Stichler & Hauptman 1998). On this basis some authors go so far as to develop grand visions of technological utopias where constant interaction leads to an ideal democracy which displays high ethical values (Lévy 1997; Meeks 2000).

Why is this form of democracy so desirable? Collectively it allows for new forms of free and equal deliberation. Everybody can make his or her voice heard on all matters of interest. In fact, systems have been built that allow for public discourse of socially relevant topics which are based explicitly on the (ethical) principles of Habermasian discourse theory (Heng & de Moor 2003). This means that ICT can be used to approximate the ideal speech situation where only the power of the better argument counts. This collective advantage can be translated into the maximisation of knowledge and therefore in an optimal viability of the outcomes of deliberations. At the same time the participation of stakeholders guarantees the moral viability of discussions. Also, the chance to participate in discourses and thereby influence the outcome of democratic decisions is supposed to bring about emancipation and empowerment of the individuals (Blanke 1998; Hirschheim & Klein 1994).

In the context of this discussion one should note that the introduction of this sort of online deliberation and policy formulation could have radical consequences. It leads away from the established representational model of democracy toward a more direct type of democracy. This can be seen as positive for the reasons given above but it can also be problematic. Either way this vision of a more radical technology-mediated democracy is highly ethically charged. It affects the individual's rights and obligations, it is based on our view of human beings and it changes the distribution of power. This radical democracy could thus strengthen the moral legitimacy of democracy but it can also produce problems.

### 3.3 Problems of e-Government and e-Democracy

Both, e-Government and e-Democracy, run into problems. The problems of e-Government tend to be of a technical nature whereas e-Democracy faces more fundamental obstacles. e-Government faces problems of technical implementation, of user involvement, of cooperation between different administrative departments and the like. These are typical problems of systems design, implementation, and use that we know from the information systems literature. While these problems are not trivial, there are established ways of addressing them.

The problems of e-Democracy are more serious. While the promises that it holds are immense, the criticism is just as impressive. Some authors state that e-Democracy simply does not live up to its promises, that instead of promoting democracy, ICT has undemocratic effects (Breen 1999), that instead of decentralising access, it centralises it (Yoon 1996) that it stabilises power structures instead of changing them (Stallman 1995; Weizenbaum 1976). Another fundamental problem is that of the democratic ideal that seems to be promoted by ICT, namely direct democracy. This may appear attractive for several reasons, but it also threatens to turn into the plebiscite that, since Plato, has been feared as the ugly face of democracy (Ess 1996; Paletz 2000).

Apart from these problems which draw into doubt whether e-Democracy is really desirable at all, there are also numerous practical problems. Among these we find the nature of the Internet which is designed to avoid central control which might make it difficult to regulate it to the extent that it might be suitable for e-democratic purposes (Lessig 2001). Then there is the complex of problems caused by globalisation and the change of the nature of the state. E-democracy offers the vision of a world-wide democracy but at the same

time we do not know how global problems can be addressed. Our political system and our democracies are based on the nation-state, whose future is uncertain (cf. Castells 1997).

## 4. The commercial paradigm in e-Government and e-Democracy

Thus far it was argued that its ethical qualities are of central importance for the legitimacy of democracy. It was then discussed that within democracies ICT can be used in two fundamentally different ways: as a tool for administration and service delivery or as a means of changing the way democracy is conducted. The former, here called e-Government, is relatively unproblematic as it only changes the modes of delivery of established processes. The latter, e-Democracy, holds radical promises as well as potential pitfalls, both of which are closely linked to its moral foundation. What this paper is interested in is how the use of business as a paradigm influences the discussion, perception, and use of ICT in a democracy. This section will therefore introduce what the concept of a business as a paradigm means before discussion which effect the commercial paradigm has on e-Government and e-Democracy

### 4.1 The (e-)Commercial paradigm

E-commerce, understood as the use of ICT in business, is as complex a topic as e-Government or e-Democracy. It has been the object of extensive attention by IS researchers. This paper does not aim to reflect this research or to say anything about e-Commerce as such. Instead, it is interested in the use of e-Commerce as a rhetorical tool, in the way perceptions of e-Commerce are used to shape expectations of e-Government and e-Democracy. E-commerce is thus seen as a paradigm in a weakly Kuhnian (1996) sense. Paradigms shape our view of reality, they determine what is important and relevant. In this sense the use of ICT in the economic system can be said to be a paradigm of the use of ICT in the political system.

In order to understand this paradigm we need to briefly discuss which advantageous characteristics e-Commerce has that makes it attractive to people who are interested in political applications of ICT. Arguably the most important reason for the use of the commercial paradigm is the huge success of e-Commerce. While some of the initial enthusiasm has died down when the stocks of the dot.com collapsed, the markets of e-Commerce and e-business is still growing. Technology is now mature enough to offer its advantages at low costs and ICT in business has

by now become so ubiquitous that some authors see it as a commodity (Carr 2003). The advantages of e-Commerce can be divided in those for the individual organisation that adopts it and those for society at large. For the individual organisation, e-Commerce promises cost reduction and market expansion (Shin 2003). The most visible aspect of this is the reduction of transaction costs (Welty & Becerra-Fernandez 2001; Castells 2000). Social advantages of e-Commerce are increased competition (Spinello 2000), the creation of new markets (Schiller 1999) and the aggregate effects of cost reduction, which should result in an increase in overall welfare. Related advantages with moral undertones are liberty and efficiency. Liberty stands for greater consumer choice but also for a more flexible design of economic relationship, as for example in teleworking (McCalman 2003). Efficiency is the cause of welfare increases but it also implies other business virtues such as flexibility, and customer-centeredness.

#### **4.2 Reasons for the use of the commercial paradigm**

The reason why e-Commerce may seem like a useful paradigm for the use of ICT in governments is its success. If e-Commerce could be successful, so the argument goes, then e-Government or e-Democracy should copy the approaches and processes and thereby copy the success. Furthermore, business in general is perceived to be able to overcome problems inherent in democratic decision making and administration and the adoption of the commercial paradigm is implied to improve this situation.

Spelt out in more detail, there are several explicit or implicit arguments for the adoption of the commercial paradigm. First, there is the technical one. Many of the commercially available systems have now reached a level of maturity that allows businesses to depend on them and to generate steady profits. Using such established systems (possible systems would include enterprise resource planning or customer relationship management) would allow administrations to avoid the tedious systems development process.

Apart from the technical side, there are organisational issues. Democratic institutions are often perceived to be bureaucratic and slow, to be inflexible and disregard the needs of the citizens. Business in general and e-Commerce in particular are viewed differently. Modern businesses need to be agile, to understand their environment including competitors, suppliers, and customers, and they can focus their efforts when necessary. Translated to governments this would mean that

decisions could be made more quickly while incorporating the important stakeholders. Commercial processes should overcome bureaucracies and allow a focus on the citizen. Last but not least, it should go some way toward addressing the problem of motivation. Civil servants and democratic politicians are often viewed as unsuitable for their jobs and not sufficiently motivated. The business world, allegedly, knows how to deal with this sort of problem through a sophisticated management of incentives and human resources.

Then there are the commercial benefits based on market principles that could be translated in political benefits. Among them we find a greater liberty and more choice for the consumer. In terms of democracy this might translate into competition between jurisdictions or between organisations within jurisdictions. This should lead to more freedom and better services for the citizen.

While these are probably not all of the advantages of the commercial paradigm, they encompass the most important ones. For our argument it is important to see that these contentions are of a moral nature. Whether it is the mere improvement of business processes, the saving of costs, or the general overhaul of administrations, they all translate into moral goods such as freedom, welfare, and distribution of the citizen.

#### **4.3 Problems of the commercial paradigm**

While there are good reasons to apply the commercial paradigm to ICT use in government and politics, some of which have a clear moral content, there are also plausible arguments to be made against it. We will briefly look at the limits of the analogy of customer and citizen, at problem of the analogy of business and politics, and finally at genuine political problems.

The first problem of the commercial paradigm is the equation of customers and citizens. This is useful in so far as citizens have the same role as customers, namely as recipients of services and goods. However, it is important to see that there are fundamental differences between customers and citizens. A company caters to the needs of customers but only when and if this is in its own interest. A customer who is overly troublesome, cannot pay, threatens the organisation's integrity, etc. has no right to be catered to. This is different for citizens who remain citizens no matter what. While a customer usually has the choice between suppliers, the same is rarely true for citizens. We cannot choose which country or state we want to live in. Furthermore, the state has a huge amount of power over the citizen, which is not comparable with the firm's power over the customer. Most

importantly, customer and company are fundamentally separate entities, whereas citizen and state depend on one another. Ideally, in a democracy, the government should represent the state, which is a manifestation of the people who are citizens of the state. A government thus has to accept citizens because it is (indirectly) acting on their behalf. Describing citizens as customer thus takes away their input and ownership in state and government and thereby robs the state of its own power basis.

The next group of problems of the commercial paradigm consists of the analogy of political and economic system. Can the state be run like a company or a market and is political leadership like commercial management? There are some reasons to negate this question. First, there is the problem of competition. We have seen that the strength of the commercial paradigm is partly based on competition, which is supposed to create more motivation and better welfare. In politics there is the question whether competition between governments is fundamentally possible and if it is desirable. What should competition in government look like? Should we have to financial authorities and the one with the better tax rate wins? This seems unlikely. Competition is only possible between states and there it is questionable because citizens are not free to choose. Another problem of competition, when applied to citizens, is that, by definition, it produces losers. If citizens were to compete for state services, then some would not get them. This is sometimes possible and legitimate (for example for research grants) but in many cases the nature of state services rules out that some have to lose (e.g. social welfare).

Second, there is the problem of efficiency. Efficiency is supposed to be one of the great strengths of businesses and something that politics and public administration lack. However, a closer look reveals that it is difficult to define efficiency. In economics it is usually held to be Pareto-optimality (Sen 1987), which means that a state is efficient where no more mutually beneficial exchanges are possible. The problem with this definition is that it neglects the question of justice as a state where one person owned everything and nobody else owned anything would be efficient. This definition of efficiency therefore does not seem useful but others are not readily available.

Possibly even more serious than the problems of the comparability between economic and political sphere are the genuine political problems the commercial paradigm creates. Among them there is the question of public goods. While markets

may be good at allocating scarce goods under competition they are notoriously bad at dealing with public goods (such as the environment, public infrastructure, etc.) One of the legitimating aspects of democratic governments is that they are able to use an impartial perspective in the allocation and management of public goods, e.g. network infrastructure (Chapman & Rotenberg 1995). Similarly, it can be argued that the commercial realm is not good at providing other aspects which are vital for the ethical legitimacy of democracies. Among them one finds access, which is often discussed in terms of ICT and the digital divide (Breen 1999), but which extends more generally to access to the political life. Even more important is the question of the distribution of power. Democracies require the fiction that everybody has equal access to power. While this is arguably not always the case, there still is a high degree of theoretical equality between citizens. The capitalist system has no intrinsic interest in equality of access and power (Introna 2001) and its application to politics could thus jeopardise democratic legitimacy.

The most serious issue with regards to the political problems of the commercial paradigm is that it transports a more or less hidden political ideology, namely capitalist liberalism. The very idea that the state can be seen as an economic system implies that it should be left alone and is self-regulating, the way markets are usually described. This is an ideology because it hides vested interests and describes as natural and unchangeable what is in fact man-made and contingent (Hirschheim & Klein 1994). At the same time this economic description of politics finds many proponents because it plays to the libertarian culture of the early Internet (Fagin 2000; Winner 2000). The political culture of e-Democracy as based on e-Commerce is therefore not a neutral construct but carries with it a load of implications that are not necessarily accepted by everyone (Kester 1998). Among these implications there is the suggestion that commercial exchange is the key social interaction which in turn implies a commodification not only of knowledge and information (Yoon 1996) but, at the extreme, of human relationships and political exchange.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper argued that democracy depends on its ethical legitimacy. The use of ICT in democracies can have positive as well as negative effects on this ethical legitimacy. A considerable part of literature and research on e-Government and e-Democracy is framed in terms of business, particularly e-Commerce. The point of interest in

this paper was which influence this use of commerce as a paradigm has on the foundational legitimacy of democracy. The results of this discussion were somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand the commercial paradigm promotes values such as efficiency, service quality, speed of delivery etc. that can also be valuable for the (moral) legitimacy of democracy. On the other hand it can produce problems due to the confusion of customers and citizens, the dissimilarity of political and economic system and the hidden agenda and ideology it can carry. Finally, there is the danger that the commercial paradigm shifts attention from the possibly radical (and threatening) potential of e-Democracy, with all its moral advantages and disadvantages, to the more manageable realm of e-Government. This shift that Wastell (2003) has analysed may affect the legitimacy of ICT in democracies because it hides the radical potential of e-Democracy and concentrates on those processes in e-Government that are similar to business processes by design.

Why should we care about all of this? If the argument is correct then a shift of attention to the business-like side of administration can jeopardise the viability of democratic structures. Democracy is about the exchange of views and the finding of compromises between different groups and individuals. The more international and globalise our societies become the more important it will be that we manage to include as many of the different voices as possible. The traditional nation state with a more or less homogenous population may have found it easy to determine the people's will. This is becoming more difficult and it is one of the strengths of democracy that it allows the deliberation of diverse participants. This is where ICT could play an important role and where it could strengthen the moral acceptability of democracy by widening and deepening measures of participation.

Thinking about democracy in terms of business can seriously threaten this legitimising potential of ICT. Service delivery is clearly a part of any administration but the concentration on service delivery misses the point of democracy. This is where the argument of this paper should have a clear practical impact. Decision makers who determine the use of ICT in democracies need to be aware of this pitfall. While vendors of information systems often have more experience with commercial systems and naturally try to extend their use in government, politicians and bureaucrats need to be aware that this can lead to a dangerous narrowing of the use of ICT. While framing e-Government and e-Democracy in terms of (e-)commerce is not a bad thing per se, political

decision makers need to be aware that it can produce moral problems that not only jeopardise the success of e-Government and e-Democracy but that can affect the very legitimacy of democratic structures. The commercial paradigm is certainly not the only factor that plays a role here, but it is a good indicator of the view that is held about democracy. Democracy contains certain economic structures and sets their framework. If this relationship is turned around and the economic system starts to dominate the political then its legitimacy is threatened. The commercial paradigm cannot single-handedly lead to such a result. But it can indicate that decision makers are willing to accept such a reversal of roles and it may go some way to promoting it.

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