



*Research Article*

# **E-Participation in Practice: From a Citizen Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

This article describes the development and use of e-democracy in a housing area in a Swedish municipality over more than a five-year period. The impact of the on-going dialogue between selectors and selected representatives using an ICT-artifact (Information and Communication Technology) is studied in particular. The perspectives of this research are threefold: How should (i) social, (ii) pedagogical and (iii) technical components be organized to develop, uphold or vitalize a social and learning context with ICT-supported dialogue and discussion between ordinary participants/members and their representatives? The findings of this article mainly consist of pitfalls and success factors which may influence the development and use of e-democracy on a medium sized societal level. Two important preconditions for a successful development are that the whole implementation (democratization) process is well known for the involved parties, and that there is a contract established that regulates the actions of the key actors and other participants.

**Keywords:** e-democracy, e-participation, structure, action.

## **Introduction**

Scientists in social science sometimes say that many theories have a weak empirical support. These critics advocate more theory building based on close observation and participation in the studied business environments (Walsham 2001). Such a kind of research is important and appropriate for our understanding of how the modern computer technology can affect the conditions and relationships on micro and macro levels in organizations and society (Castells 2000; Walsham 2001). In our society computer technology has a

tendency to dissolve the traditional forms of interaction between actors belonging to different levels of an organization or social system; both within society and commercial enterprises (Castells 2000; Sennet 1998). With computer technology new relational forms are possible – and in many cases actually already occurring – with effects on micro and macro relationships in a social system (Sennet 1998).

The social structure of a social system is possible to change in a way which makes the macro level better suited to release the

micro level's potential for greater influence; i.e. by help of a computer-assisted communication among the great mass of ordinary organizational members and their designated organization representatives (Habermas 1976). It is particularly interesting to explore the problems of such a kind of development and management in a social system, which emphasizes the empowerment of common members for an increased democratic development of the system as a whole. The rationale motivation for this article has been to present knowledge contributions – of both theoretical and practical value – from a field-based research of such a kind of practise.

ICT (Information and Communication Technology) can not alone and in a trivial way play a democracy-enhancing role.

Depending on the democracy type that dominates a society computer applications can in fact be developed either to support an increased direct citizen participation or strengthen a few powerful representatives in an oligarch like system (Nolte 2002). Ilshammar (2002) also points on different existing conceptions of democracy and consequently many different ideas about how ICT might support democratic values. Ilshammar and others argue therefore for the need to realize that the concept of democracy can be categorized in different ways. Ilshammar mentions two common approaches for democracy – (i) the conventional or representative one or (ii) the radical or direct approach for democracy. He also specifies three more complex models of democracy namely following ones: instant democracy, strong democracy and thin democracy.

**Table 1. Three Key Dimensions of Democracy**

(Translated from: Ilshammar 2002, page 30)

<b>Model:</b>	<i>Instant Democracy</i>	<i>Strong Democracy</i>	<i>Thin Democracy</i>
<b>Target:</b>	People Sovereignty/Autonomy	Individual's freedom	Equality
<b>Objective:</b>	To accelerate the impact of a public opinion in policy	To provide the citizens an opportunity to discuss and act in common affairs	To develop a management which works better and costs less
<b>The basic Legitimacy:</b>	Majority decisions	Public debate	Accountability
<b>Citizen Roles:</b>	Decision makers	Opinion formers	Selectors, customers
<b>Representatives' mandate:</b>	Restricted	Interactive	Unrestricted
<b>IT-use:</b>	Information Service Discussion	Information Service Discussion	Information Service Decisions

In the article the concepts of e-participation and e-democracy are used frequently and together. E-democracy accounts for a state of widespread, open and equal dialogue and discussion about shared concerns in a social context with the help of an appropriately designed ICT-application. E-democracy in this sense presupposes however e-participation,

namely that a lot of the contextual members – a critical number of them – have (i) access to the ICT-application and (ii) are familiar with its dialogue and discussion content and (iii) frequently contribute with their own posts. Without such a connection and activity – e-participation – it is pointless to call an ICT-application in terms of e-democracy. As a

consequence of this reasoning, this article uses the two concepts – e-democracy and e-participation – mostly in pairs to select a duality of these two interdependent concepts.

This argumentation shows that e-democracy and e-participation are concepts in a process of social change. Social change for and with e-democracy and e-participation is not only dependent on the ICT-artifact. The actual result is instead dependent on (i) the social context and (ii) its participants, actors and stakeholders, (iii) the ICT-artifact, (iv) the elected democratic ideal and (v) other significant concerned and affected processing elements. This understanding is fundamental in the article. The article describes namely a research effort, where the focus was on how social and technical factors contributed to the success or failure of a process for the benefit of strong and direct democratic ideals.

The article presents a research work, which studies specifically the importance of the social aspects in order to increase the citizens' influence in a locally delimited society with help of an e-democracy solution. The aim is to contribute to the world of research with a multifaceted description and understanding in response to this main problem:

- How can (i) social, (ii) pedagogical and (iii) technical components be arranged and coordinated in a process of developing, upholding or vitalizing a social context with the help of ICT assisted dialogues and discussions – e-democracy and e-participation – between participants/members and their chosen representatives?

The research has focus on the importance of the socio-individual aspects in achieving an increased democratic dialogue and a discussion within and around a Virtual Community. In terms of social learning, pedagogy and methodology, the purpose has been to supply new and valuable knowledge within the subject fields, e-democracy and e-participation. This

implies a research related and connected to learning theories of the type “socio-cultural learning” (Säljö 2000; Marton & Booth 2000) and to socio-psychological conceptions about individuation, consciousness and inter-human relations (Goffman 1959, 1963; Mead 1972; Schutz 1945; Fromm 1979, 1982; Buber 1993). The learning aspects have even been linked to theories about micro-/meso generated “structuration” of the social meso and macro plan (Habermas 1996; Castells 2000; Schutz 1945) – i.e. a structuration that is carried out by social individuals in a group community.

The results of this research may provide guiding recommendations for other similar socio-individual research and change contributions for an e-democracy and an e-participation, which connect to an established critical social scientific research ideal (Habermas 1996, 2003; Alvesson & Deetz 2000).

### **The Structure of the Article – An Overview**

The introduction has presented the main problem of the article and some theoretical aspects of a specific research effort on the topic of e-democracy and e-participation in a local social context. The remainder of the article has a structure in accordance with the following short overview of sections and mutual relations between them.

#### **E-participation and E-democracy**

This section contains a presentation of more specific research on the topic of e-democracy and e-participation.

#### **The Citizen Perspective**

This part of the article has focus on citizen aspects related to ICT-systems for increased democratic influence.

#### **Methods**

An action and praxis-oriented approach was selected for the current research effort. This method for the actual field-research is described in this section.

### **The Empirical Material**

This section contains a more detailed presentation of the research case, the researcher role and the observed target groups in the study. In addition the composition of the empirical material is reported in this section. The two subheadings of the section are:

- *The case*
- *The research project's target groups*

### **Empirical Findings and Analytical Reflections**

The empirical material's most prominent characteristics are analyzed under different headings. The analysis is qualitative, as shown by the argumentation style and the section outline of the main and subheadings. The section specifically addresses the following four analytical categories – section headings – from the empirical results:

- *Social consumption and the importance of personal attributes*
- *The phenomenon of inter-passivity in the social practice*
- *Limiting factors*
- *Dialogue community and the ethical perspective*

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

This section reconnects the empirical results and analysis to the initial research question, namely how a process of social and technical components can be arranged to achieve a strong democratic change in a form of ICT-mediated dialogues and discussions – e-democracy and e-participation.

- *Pitfalls*
- *Success factors*

### **E-participation and E-democracy**

At least in a very traditional society there is a risk, that new and community developing

ideas and artifacts are oppressed by the normative establishment. On the other hand an ICT-mediated community is also connected with risks for a society's development and welfare. One obvious risk is a substantial loosening of the temporal and spatial senses to the "real" world, which successively might decrease the citizens' commitment and responsibility for adequate activities in the social, physical and biological reality. If we – as citizens in a society – dedicate our daily lives to a time- and space-resolved approach for social and societal affairs, a society might risk its citizens' engagement and creativity for value-driven actions to develop and test alternative solutions – social, societal and technical artifacts – on various "real" problems in our social, physical and biological life-world.

In a study how modern communication technologies can strengthen democracy, Björkemarken (2002) noticed how the various efforts by the authorities for e-democracy failed to live up to reasonable expectations. According to Björkemarken, attempts more or less stranded because of the unwillingness and resistance from elected representatives and those in power to engage themselves to regular and long-time dialogues/discussions via modern artifacts for communication. The lack of commitment from those in power for dialogue/discussion with modern communication tools is, according to Björkemarken, a major difficulty. Both Ilshammar (2002) and Björkemarken (2002) emphasize the importance of developing the social aspects of an e-democratic solution, before taking hold of the technical problems. They argue separately for the urgent need to test different models of e-democracy solutions for increased dialogue and discussion between citizens and their elected representatives.

The concept "e-participation" stands for an endeavor that together with the ICT-applications transform the democratic order that leads to increased participation and leverage of the citizens in the democratic process. The e-participation is therefore closely linked to the idea of

liberating the users' potential as social influencing actors. Macintosh (2007) expresses this in terms of upgrading from "e-enabling" to a condition of "e-empowerment".

Chen and Gant (2001) emphasize the importance of application service providers (ASP) to develop and maintain e-services on the local authority's/representation's level. They highlight two factors in order to expand an ASP-concept to e-forms for an increased internal and external integration/collaboration, namely: (1) that local decision-makers develop their insights and a basic know-how about the IT and ASP as positive change factors for their operation and (2) that the collaboration is based on a permanent support and commitment from the highest decision takers within the local authority/representation level. According to Chen and Gant an increased inner activity-efficiency is the main reason for the representatives to be interested in public e-services, with or without the assistance of the ASPs.

In a Habermas initiated analysis, Wiklund (2005) presents an interesting draft standard for the developing of ICT-services that strengthen democracy on the local social plane ("ICT-enabled services in Swedish municipalities"). Wiklund proceeds from Habermas' communication structure ("Discourse Ethics"), which aims at increasing the democratic influence in the social life through an enlarged interpersonal communication characterized by a rational argumentation. Wiklund emphasizes Habermas' three fundamental rules for such a rational argumentation, namely: (1) that each actor must create and maintain a basis that is free from contradictions and that is consequent for his "truth claims", (2) that each actor follows a procedure that permits other actors to test the soundness in an argument and (3) that the platform for discussion must be open and allow actors to present different opinions and values. Referring to Habermas' discursive ethics, Wiklund identifies four conditions that affect the possibilities to realize an ICT-supported discussion environment for a

well-thought popular conference in the local politic process. The four conditions are:

- (1) Generality: that all the actors or at least their legitimate interests, shall be included.
- (2) Autonomy: that different opinions shall be allowed and evaluated equally, based on their argumentation quality.
- (3) Power neutrality: that the discursive value of an argument shall be decisive, which means that the environment for discussion shall not be cut down by dictatorial behavior from eventual (i) administrative, (ii) economical and (iii) cultural power.
- (4) Role taking: that the discussion participants adapt an argumentation discipline which is characterized by mutuality and impartiality discussants.

### **The Citizen Perspective**

Other researchers raise the importance of the citizens' aspects for research and adapting ICT in social life. According to Reddick (2005), the e-administration caused the social bureaucracy to change from street-level bureaucracies to system-level bureaucracies, i.e. that the citizens and the society's decision makers and authority representatives to an increased extent communicate indirectly via ICT-mediated interfaces. Authority representatives distance themselves thereby from individual matters. They are instead directed towards maintaining and developing the indirect communication system and supplying the inter-operationality through links to other social functions. Reddick means that the citizen's perspective ("the demand side perspective") until now has been relatively unexplored within the subject field of e-authority. Reddick's conclusion becomes therefore that the e-democracy ought to focus on different factors and on the aspects' importance for the citizens' positive experiences of the ICT-supplied social functions ("citizen interaction").

Mahrer and Krimmer (2005) point to the fact that the authority initiative for the e-democracy project most often does not attain the critical stadium to formally be inserted in the management's strategy for the e-administration. Their research also shows that the e-democracy is given a lower priority – has a lower tempo and gets less assistance – than the so-called e-administrative project. During the concept, the middleman paradox, they summarize an essential point in their research, namely that the politicians – with a responsibility for the citizens participating in the democratic work – in reality obstruct organizing the social life with technical aids that can increase the citizens' influence in the political process. Their conclusion is that the politicians give priority to a thin democracy, but in principle only use ICT-aids for public information and authority service. According to Mahrer and Krimmer, the research offers therefore no support for the thesis that the politicians can be counted as a driving force to develop the e-democracy for the benefit of a "strong" or "witty" democracy view, i.e. public ICT-solutions for a citizen-oriented feedback, consultation and participation in the democratic process.

"Fear of change appears to be the politicians' main driver for interfering with the further evolution of e-democracy. This leads to a special situation - the 'middleman paradox' - as the very same parliamentarians who would be responsible for introducing new forms of citizens' participation for political decision-making are explicitly and implicitly opposing these reforms. Based on our findings, we want to shape the conjecture that the more citizens' participation-specific concepts of e-democracy are suggesting, the less support for these concepts will be provided by politicians." (Mahrer & Krimmer 2005, page 38)

Carter and Bélanger (2005) have examined factors that influence the citizens' use of computer provided authority services. Their research is interesting and important. An authority wants namely to achieve the advantages of an increased inner efficiency with the e-administration,

which requires that the "clients"/citizens carry out with a big part of the authority's previous work concerning information and service contribution. At the same time, the customers' experiences of the e-system can reflect an important outer criterion for effectiveness, namely their experience of "clients' usefulness". The e-authority services can therefore conveniently be evaluated on the basis of a customer perspective, i.e. in which extent they are used and which experiences the users have of the e-system. Carter and Belanger have combined three models – Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory and trustworthiness models – to their own model for examining the citizens' experiences of the e-authorities. Their examination specifies that the e-system must (1) be easy to use, (2) have compatible resemblances with traditional services and (3) be reliable, i.e. exact, opportune and trustworthy.

As previously described, e-democracy and e-participation are two dependent and necessary elements of a socio-technical arrangement to gradually achieve a democratic ideal and vision of any kind (e.g. an ideal of strong democracy). Such an arrangement is intended to modify a social context in a way that it more than before meets and fulfills the values and the criteria for a specific ideal. The nature and extent of social change is therefore a measure of whether a socio-technical arrangement for e-democracy and e-participation has been successful or not.

This argumentation about the meaning of the concepts of e-democracy and e-participation can also be linked to the need for democratic legitimacy. E-democracy – as a virtual form for popular influence based on dialogue and discussion – gets its legitimacy namely from a high degree of participation of the members in the social context. Another important and similar claims of legitimacy are met if the e-democratic form and its content (the ICT-application) match the majority's beliefs and experiences concerning fundamental democratic values. The democratic ideal in this article is of the same type as

Ilshammar (see Table 1) calls *strong democracy*, which means that dialogues and discussions are oriented towards an optimal self-realization (“autonomy”) for the participants of the social context.

### Methods

The research work has been decided to a great extent by the conditions that apply for action/praxis research (Himmelstrand 1982; Sandberg 1982; Swedner 1982). According to Sandberg (1982) this manner of research is characterized by the departure point in terms of value in treating persons as subjects and not as research objects in the research process, and that this working form is in harmony with the strives toward a participant democracy. Sandberg also emphasizes, that the phase of dialogues and actions has been framed in a theoretical and method-characterized reflection, i.e. that the knowledge has been used in the dialogue and that the knowledge has been produced there and in the subsequent reflection. Both on a general plane and in the specific field related situations, the research has been characterized by such an action/praxis research.

The research task had thus an action oriented disposition, namely that the research – besides its scientific knowledge contribution – should even contribute in changing the practice, the researched object, in accordance with the vision and aim for “Lindeborg on the Net”. This change work was thought principally as being carried out as resident-driven processes. The central component in these processes constituted a collective storytelling in a Virtual Community. The computer-based and computer-transmitted storytelling should result in verbal descriptions/images that functioned as targets for collaboration between the residents in the Real Community of the research field. The previously presented research problem expresses a research-characterized part of the action oriented set-up.

The collected data material has undergone a phenomenographical and phenomenological analysis. The phenomenographical analysis was

grounded on the key actors’ experiences and their factual observed contributions in the project “Lindeborg on the Net”. This analysis resulted in an initial concept pattern for the studied phenomenon. The phenomenological step consisted of a creative and generalizing analysis of the initial concept pattern. The research work’s knowledge contribution is therefore a result of a concluding and “personal” tuning of previous working and analysis steps.

The methodical courses of action can be summarized as:

- Action-oriented exploration (praxis research) of the empirical data.
- Praxis research of the type observing participant.
- Experience-oriented observations.
- Reflecting constructions to a preliminary understanding about behavior patterns.
- Phenomenographical analysis toward a deepened knowledge.
- Phenomenological integration to the research work’s final knowledge contribution.

### The Empirical Material

#### The Case

The transformation project “Lindeborg on the Net” (Persson 2005, 2008) was carried out 2000 - 2005 in the housing region, Lindeborg, in Malmö. The aim was to develop a virtual environment with regional information and links to important service functions, and with an interactive functionality for dialogues and discussions between the housing members and their representatives. The project was managed under non-profit forms and was started up as cooperation between the tenants’ representatives of the Lindeborg’s region and a few researchers from the Institution for Informatics at Lund University.

Four local HSB-associations were the prime movers in the Lindeborg's project. These associations had a great number of tenants in approximately 1500 apartments. The number of tenants in these associations corresponded consequently to the number of inhabitants in a smaller community. The same associations constituted the primary targeted group of tenant associations for the project "Lindeborg on the Net".

The research is characterized as a multifaceted illustration and reflection over problems and possibilities in initiating, developing and maintaining a

grassroots' operated virtual environment for common problem-solving based on dialogues and discussions between the members/electors and their chosen representatives in a local social context.

In this process, the researcher's role can be described as a uniting and instigating imaginator in a partnership. This matches well with Hedberg et al's (1994) description of the imaginator's function, namely a person who engages and holds together different actors around a common aim. Through the imaginator's care, a network of co-operating actors can assert themselves externally as a strongly resourceful and competitive actor. From a research perspective, the role can be considered as an action-oriented researcher (Baskerville & Wood-Harper 1998).

An important factor for the development of "Lindeborg on the Net" was that since spring 2000, there was an IT-workshop in Lindeborg. The concept "workshop" is highly suitable, even if the issue was about a virtual one, because the IT-adjustments occurred on home computers during one's own leisure time. The IT-workshop's core was created by five Lindeborg inhabitants with a varying knowledge about computers, but with a burning interest in creating a website containing information, services and interactivity functions that were suitable for the inhabitants in Lindeborg.

The conception "Lindeborg on the Net" was, in fact, a complex idea and contained a quantity of co-operating components where the home website in itself and the IT-workshop with its relations to partners were two important components. The complexity in the conception was a consequence of the vision and aim picture that permeated the project "Lindeborg on the Net". The long-range vision encompassed namely concept phrases as learning neighborhood, individual and collective welfare development in a housing region and enterprise for a robust and tenable local social development. Based on this vision, the project "Lindeborg on the Net" was formed as a continuous managed process that does not have a deadline when a well-defined product must be completed. Instead what is dealt with is to gradually develop different versions/generations of the components that together constitute the conception "Lindeborg on the Net".

### **The Research Project's Target Groups**

The process "Lindeborg on the Net" had two major recipients/audiences. The first target group was composed of representatives from the residents and the aim was to enroll them as prospective partners or key actors. The other target group was the common residents in the local area in their roles as users, participants and potential helpers to develop "Lindeborg on the Net" as a complementary social structure in favor for a dialogue-based democratic community. The two target groups were meant to co-operate in an open-ended partnership to encourage the residents' perception of involvement and influence over their local social contexts. This partnership underlined very much the importance of the individual level in terms of devotion and contributions from a considerable amount of common actors/residents in the local area.

As the research and change work took many years, there were many events and elements to reflect upon. The activity data



were of two kinds – namely associated with (1) developing and/or (2) using “Lindeborg on the Net” as a Local Virtual Community. Many of these activities were preceded by clear planning in the form of project and strategy plans and scenario descriptions.

The gathering of data occurred especially as observations at a large number of “working meetings” with the primary target group’s actors, i.e. with the IT-workshop’s members and with the housing representatives in their potential roles as partners. Furthermore, there occurred a number of meetings at study circles with users of the website. At both these types of meetings, the participants were encouraged to express their views under conversation-like forms. The opportunity was also given to convey written-down answers to questionnaire’s questions. A questionnaire on the website for “Lindeborg on the Net” was also a source for data from the users of the website.

The large number of meetings was also summarized in the form of stories for different longer periods of time. These stories reflect the most prominent exchanges of opinions, events and activities during the respective period of time. The basis for these stories has consisted of accumulated memory and sense impressions and written supports in the form of meeting memos, protocols, analysis drafts, saved emails and forum posts during the respective period of time.

The empirical data material can be summarized according to the following list:

- Messages in the discussion forums (number of posts is 5481 spread over 378 user names).
- Experiences and points of views conveyed at about 50 meetings during the years 2000-2005 in the project “Lindeborg on the Net”.
- Exchange of opinions at special arrangements, e.g. at the hearings and the study circles in the district Lindeborg.

- Questionnaires to the users of “Lindeborg on the Net”.
- Feedback on written summaries of passed scenarios for certain periods.
- Informal exchanges of opinions, e.g. emails and phone conversations about events of a particular importance (number of stored emails related to “Lindeborg on the Net” is approximately 300).
- Logged data at the logging in and visits at specific websites.
- Visit counters at various websites.

As indicated by the list, the treatment is mostly about data presented for a qualitative interpretation. The only exceptions consisted of visit counters, specific logging data and of a few quantitative oriented questions on enquiries and interview-resembling conversations. The data collections were preceded by inventories in order to work out relevant measuring points, e.g. in the form of questions about critical success factors for the development work and the use of “Lindeborg on the Net”. These inventories sketched successively a preliminary knowledge pattern from which the following data work and the analysis were carried out, forming conclusions for the research work.

### **Empirical Findings and Analytical Reflections**

The article’s findings and conclusions are the result of an initial and summative treatment of the empirical material followed by a more in depth and focused analysis. The initial processing can be described as a categorized reflection from a “helicopter view” of empirical data. This empirical work has consisted of periodic summative reports, protocols/minutes, interview calls, responses, emails, discussion posts on ICT-fora and, not at least, in the form of personal meetings and concrete actions of various kinds.

The subsequent and focused analysis was conducted using various methodological techniques, namely a combination of phenomenographic and phenomenological analysis from different theoretical perspectives to capture the core knowledge content in the process "Lindeborg on the Net". The action and praxis-oriented exploration has also been characterized by a hermeneutical shift between theory and empirical evidence throughout the research.

The observations from the process "Lindeborg on the Net" revealed a very little willingness for personal non-profit-making contributions in a grassroots' work in which "the interactions with others" and the basic social concept of "an increased civic democratic empowerment" are central. The characteristic pattern from the empirical data showed namely a low willingness for sacrifice, a bad readiness and a poor endurance to do something for others outside the own private sphere of interests. This pattern emerged more clearly as the difficulties and setbacks piled up.

Thus the empirical data showed significant difficulties in bringing about dialogues concerning events/contexts about general human themes in the housing associations, which constituted the process "Lindeborg on the Net's" target group. When nevertheless such dialogue attempts were carried out from the "grassroots" approach, their initiatives were thoroughly ignored by the selected representatives for the housing associations. "Remaining silent" was the most common way for the selected representatives to withdraw from meaning-creating dialogues with their members on the issues, which were raised in the forums. Another common reaction was that the critical dialogue attempts were met with messages which – under lobby-like forms – on one hand, incriminated the critical postings, and on another, expressed their appreciation for the selected representatives' contributions in the associations and their choice of avoiding dialogues in the forums. The frequency of these counter-postings and the postings' contents indicated that the

matter concerned an organized surveillance of the forums for lobbying purpose.

### **Social Consumption and the Importance of Personal Attributes**

The lack of personal responsibility for the dialogue relationships was a phenomenon, which appeared very clearly in "Lindeborg on the Net's" practice. The lack of personal responsibility for the dialogue relationships was – together with the lack of affectedness and the inability and lack of interest in expressing a functional meaning – fundamental obstacles, which prevented the dialogue attempts – both on formal and informal personal meetings like the discussions on the forums – to result in some frequent experiences of a meaningful community among the participating actors. They became the major obstacles for achieving a certain degree of "common sense" among the dialogue participants – i.e. for the possibilities of achieving a fairly common meaning on the basis of co-orientation/consensus concerning the discussion field's knowledge and value source.

The lack of personal responsibility appeared as a widespread attitude of a lack of returning the service, i.e. an attitude – or rather a nature – of not responding to other people's contributions (dialogue messages or concrete contributions) with an own corresponding return of that kind of service. Another frequently stated explanation for the unwillingness of carrying out with concrete efforts was, that the counted on support from Lindeborg's selected representatives in the housing associations did not occur. A tangible support from the selected representatives in the housing associations thus seemed to be the looming reward, which constituted one of the leading and original drive forces for the participants in the formal action group for the process "Lindeborg on the Net". When the selected housing representatives' support and participation tended to come off, the motivation degree in the action group faded namely at an accelerating rate.

Castells (2000) stresses in fact the great need to replace and shift out “external” institutions and structures in their socialization role of identity-building standards. In a network society these old role-actors – obsolete institutions and structures – are progressively undermined and destroyed by the citizens’ experiences of norms and standards in a networking community.

### **The Phenomenon of Inter-Passivity in the Social Practice**

In the process “Lindeborg on the Net”, the socio-individual aspects have been associated with a particular immunity among the key actors and partners for the process’s vision. This implies, in reality, an observed lack of commitment and perseverance for a central democracy value, namely the value of open and equitable dialogues and discussions in a popular movement environment. This underlines the fact that both the research and practice should place emphasis on the three parts’ connection between (i) the socio-individual and (ii) socio-structural aspects and (iii) the vision/goals of social change processes. The socio-individual and socio-structural aspects have in this case failed to respond sufficiently to the process’s vision/goals, which proved to be too difficult to bridge with the communication and dialogues in a learning process. This also implies a support for the research problem, namely to place great emphasis on the social factors during the research, development and use of a public computer-based forum for dialogues and discussions.

The conditions, which characterized the development of the action group for the process “Lindeborg on the Net”, reinforce the image of a practice of mental structures, which impede or prevent the opportunity of realizing the fundamental values of a democracy in a socio-psychological change work. The analysis describes a development of the action group from an original ideality and action-oriented entrepreneurship in an informal constellation to gradually incorporate patterns of non-responsibility, non-

willingness, non-acting and non-ideality, which were pursued and maintained by a formal organizational culture, influenced by the culture in the surrounding housing associations. In both cases, a counterproductive practice for fundamental ethical values was revealed. These values were however as well referred to as included in the formal structures’ ethical base. The lacking agreement between the practice respectively the pronounced value basis, is therefore an inconsistency, which undermines the formal structures’ legitimacy.

This research has been carried out on the basis of an idea about the importance of the norms as problems – alternative possibility-makers – of e-democratic solutions for an increased citizen influence. Sennett’s (1998) and Castells’ (2000) argumentation reveals the importance of standard impregnated processes in terms of ICT-based interactions between citizens in favour for more suitable democracy- and community-enhancing “structures”. Their analysis correspond to the general and specific problem in this article, namely to explore and analyze “Lindeborg on the Net” as a social change process with such a goal.

### **Limiting Factors**

The process “Lindeborg on the Net” was characterized by big difficulties in obtaining support from the established democratic association’s structures for a democracy strengthening grassroots’ work, which is initiated and run by non-profit-making powers. The experiences are specifically that the local democratic structures – through both an active as well as a prolonged passive resistance – worked against the attempts to complement the local housing area with an infrastructure, which would have meant a meeting place for open and equitable virtual dialogue meetings between the local citizens and their various congregations’/associations’ democratically elected representatives.

Furthermore, the empirical data showed significant difficulties in mobilizing personal action from the members and key

persons for non-profit-making activities. In addition, a clear empirical link is indicated between the experience of the absence of support and commitment from the local democratic establishment and a low personal readiness and willingness to sacrifice for non-profit-making concrete contributions/actions from the members in the non-profit-making grassroots' group.

### **Dialogue Community and the Ethical Perspective**

In his analysis of the network society Castells (2000) too states, that the extensive use of ICT leads to a resolution of time- and space-oriented cultural values in a society. In a network society a citizen's identities are primarily determined by the experiences of relationships in the ICT-mediated networks. This is, according to Castells, basically positive, if the network society members act according to democratic values in their network relationships.

The process "Lindeborg on the Net" – the studied research object – had as an aim to develop and maintain an ICT-artifact for an increased citizen influence over the decision order in a social context. This has been described as something that is ethically worth striving for, namely as a process of social, pedagogical and system technical contributions for a democracy-reinforcing order of dialogues and discussions. The research work's link to the ethics' concept has implied that the observations have been reflected to a deeper understanding of the research problem and task, namely in an analysis about how a fundamental democracy value – dialogues and discussions – has been socialized in the form of norms and rationality for personal actions.

Sennett (1998) argues that an ICT-society has a tendency to reduce our readiness for long term and sustained personal efforts. According to Sennet, an ICT-society seems to be a practise, where the citizens during their lifetime align themselves to a series of more or less short-term projects. In each project the citizens or project-participants are expected to be highly flexible and

adaptable. Sennet states, that the effect of shifting orientation to short-term projects is crumbling on the opposite character. Sennet describes this opposite character as essential for the development of societal welfare, namely as a character in favour for societal affairs in a faithful work for a particular and long-term mission in life within a specific context.

The empirical data and the following-up analytical reasoning indicate that the ethical concept of the field can be a useful theory mass to reflect upon in order to understand and draw up guidelines for the design and development of an ICT-driven dialogue and discussion based social community. The dialogue theory and related ethical notions can be a gateway to create a theoretical framework, which – matched against practical experiences – can be transformed to method and design guidelines for a successful socio-cultural change work according to the vision for the process "Lindeborg on the Net".

The analysis conducted so far shows an ethical dimension in the concept/phenomenon of a "dialogue community"; namely a dialogue community's potential of developing and maintaining our experience of providing deep personal values in a community based on dialogues with others. This aspect is also knowledge-philosophical, as it affects the "legitimate" claim for the truth/meaning – in the meaning of "norm" for individual persons and the "community's" attitude and behavior – which can be developed within the framework for such a dialogue community.

The fieldwork in "Lindeborg on the Net" revealed also the power factors' importance for the interaction between the actors in the social system/process. A reflection is that the social system produces *super actors* and that the social structure is an arena in which the individuals who gain power and prestige are those who can best connect the social structure's and the illusionistic/basic meta-structure's highest legitimate claim for power to his or her own person.

These empirical findings correspond to Goffman (1959, 1963), who points out how our individual acting and navigating – our planned appearances – in a social context depends on our need to reconstruct an identity-strengthening mental understanding of the existence.

The social structures can thus be strengthened or changed depending on the character by the corresponding exchange game between structure-related action and awareness on the actors' level. To develop and appeal to the general current standards can be important in order to coordinate many individuals' actions in order to attain urgent structural changes.

Such a super actor, or many of them, may of course in practice function as formidable disturbances in a social system, namely that the personal desire for power can drive such a super player to manipulate the system's legitimizing powers in order to achieve his or her own benefit in the form of power, prestige, utility and pleasure. A reflection becomes that the super actors are hugely important for a social system's function – for good, but unfortunately often also for very bad outcomes. In the process, "Lindeborg on the Net", the risks with *counterproductive super actors* were revealed very clearly. The counterproductive super actors imply namely a risk that the social system is undermined through a widespread reduced or destroyed trust among the other social actors for the system's legitimacy toward a higher meaning and value, which officially is referred to.

### Discussion and Conclusions

The all-pervading problem in the process "Lindeborg on the Net" was the difficulty to get common people to contribute to a non-profit/idealistic work for others. This problem manifested itself as unwillingness from some selected representatives to participate in close and equal dialogues with their selectors/members at the ICT-based discussion forum. A frequently expressed argument for not contributing to a higher degree was that one didn't have time. The prevailing attitude was that spare

time was entirely reserved for oneself and the closest family and friends.

This attitude towards spare time seemed also to strengthen the selected representatives' traditional experience and ideas concerning their function as representatives, i.e. that representatives do not have to meet the requests for informal dialogue and discussion meetings on a non-regulated time with selectors/members on a discussion forum. The experiences from the process "Lindeborg on the Net" however, also revealed a deeper aspect of the frequent phenomenon of not having time. Not having time was namely synonymous with not wanting to convert a specific spare time into a critical crucial non-profit time for others and for oneself in a social context.

Want of time was therefore not generally synonymous with real lack of time, but reflected rather an unwillingness to do some higher degree of personal sacrifice for the others in a social structure. The problem of getting key actors to reserve time in a change process of the type "Lindeborg on the Net" should therefore be seen as a phenomenon of a widespread low willingness to sacrifice.

Some results of especially practical importance can be summed up as follows:

- That elected and appointed representatives support and cooperate with an ICT-based infrastructure, which is designed and meant for democratic interactions between regular community members and their elected representatives.
- That there is a back-office organization – with appropriate resources of various types and with a clear vision and strategy – to manage and operate an ICT-based infrastructure as a socio-cultural partnership.
- That the information technology solution and the socio-cultural change process are developed and implemented with a high degree of being ready for service; i.e. as a socio-cultural arrangement ready to be

inhabited and used by both the representatives and the large group of regular forum users

The empirical material has been analyzed as pitfalls and success factors for a social-technical change process, that was meant to achieve increased democratic influence for local inhabitants using an ICT-artifact for e-democracy. These pitfalls and success factors are presented briefly.

### Pitfalls

- (1) That the initiative takers fail in gathering a group of key actors willing to sacrifice, i.e. that the process is introduced with a procedure selection that fails to remove persons with a low willingness to sacrifice.
- (2) That there doesn't exist one or many driving super-actors who are willing to give complete solutions to the other key actors and participants of the process.
- (3) That the process doesn't receive real support from resourceful and strong partners in order to prevent lack of necessary operation and development resources that obstruct the process.
- (4) That the key actors and partners of the process don't share the same devotion to the visions and aims of the process.
- (5) That the process is not characterized by a continuous creation of meanings and values through a common storytelling.

### Success Factors

- (1) That the process becomes generally known for the concerned target group.
- (2) That the key actors and participants act on the basis of a contract that regulates the respective actors' contribution in the process.
- (3) That the actors of the process can experience results/changes as a consequence of their contributions.

(4) That the most critical activities are carried out in dialogue and discussion-based workshop meetings.

(5) That the process has key actors/super-actors capable of creating and maintaining a culture of action-oriented dialogues and discussions.

(6) That the different actors' performance in the process is regulated under the all-sided influence of the process moderators.

The main conclusion in this paper is that success for this kind of ICT-project for increased influence for common citizens is very much dependent on the will of key actors and partners, their knowledge, competence and personal characteristics.

The analysis and conclusions underline the relevance of the "middleman paradox" in the e-democracy context. As mentioned earlier in this article, this concept stands for an important discovery by Mahrer and Krimmer (2005). According to their discovery politicians chosen by the people – in spite of their specific responsibility for democratic relations – tend to obstruct e-democratic solutions for an increased citizen influence in social life. This article has however described some pitfalls and success factors, which can be important to consider in a social-technical change process where the goal is to achieve e-democracy in a locally delimited social context.

The conclusions of the article give an answer to the initial research problem. The answer highlights the great importance of willingness, openness and commitment of key players with the power of change processes for e-democracy and e-participation. In addition the answer consists of a description of crucial pitfalls and success factors to consider for both researchers and practitioners. These conclusions and answers may contribute to the overall amount of knowledge in the researchfield of e-democracy and e-participation. The analysis and conclusions stressed the relevance of the "middleman paradox" in an e-democracy context.

Nevertheless the conclusions indicate ways to realize e-democracy in a locally defined social context.

The conclusions of the article also demonstrate the importance of a normative field with convincing and powerful values for guidance and orientation. This is needed to match, balance and break a distanced and ego-centered attitude with a *you-* and *we-*embossed attitude; which can be applied both to the role of being an ordinary citizen and an elected representative.

A final main conclusion in the article is that success for this kind of social entrepreneurship is very much dependent on the will of key actors and partners, their knowledge, competence and personal characteristics.

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