Informatization of local democracy: A structuration perspective

Zahid Parvez
Wolverhampton Business School, University of Wolverhampton, Telford Campus, Shifnal Road, Priorslee, Telford TF2 9NT, Shropshire, UK
E-mail: z.parvez@wlv.ac.uk

Abstract. Academics and researchers face a challenge of making sense of the role e-democracy plays in the democratic process and with what implications. This requires a deeper understanding of the objectives and assumptions that underpin e-democracy innovations, as well as institutional and technology structures that condition their role in democratic engagement. This paper interprets case study data collected from three UK local authorities in light of Giddens Structuration theory to make sense of the role e-democracy plays in the democratic process. From the data, it elicits and identifies categories of social structures as perceived by different actors surrounding e-democracy. The insights gained suggest that social structures influence actors in prioritising, shaping and appropriating e-democracy and thus, in moderating its role in local democracy. Using these insights the paper offers some useful suggestions for enhancing democratic engagement through e-democracy projects.

Keywords: Structuration, informatization, e-democracy, institutional shaping

1. Introduction

This paper highlights the influence of social (institutional) structures on different actors in shaping electronic democracy (or e-democracy) and moderating its impact on the democratic process. It argues that social structures surrounding the informatization of local democracy could provide insights into e-democracy shaping and appropriation processes. In particular, they can assist in developing understanding of issues such as: why similar ICT are applied in different ways in the democratic process across different institutional contexts; what influence these structures exert on prioritising and framing the design and implementation of e-democracy projects in different institutional context (e.g. [28]); and how these structures enable and constrain actors in their democratic engagement. The paper employs Giddens [12] structuration theory as a sensitizing device to interpret case study findings and draws out structures of signification, legitimation and domination. It is argued that these structures, not readily evident through the lenses of social or technological determinism, condition and shape the informatization of democratic practices and moderates their impact on local democracy.

The paper is organised into six sections. First, a case is made for the importance of understanding social structures surrounding e-democracy. Second, the tenets of structuration theory relevant to the purpose of this paper are highlighted. Third, the methodology employed in this research is outlined. The key findings drawn out from the case study research are then presented in two further sections: institutional mediation structures and ICT mediation structures. From the insights gained the structures of signification, legitimation and domination are elucidated. The paper argues the usefulness of the
structurational perspective in understanding the informatization of democratic practices, in how e-democracy is shaped and how its application is conditioned within institutional boundaries. Using these insights the paper concludes by offering some useful suggestions for enhancing democratic engagement through e-democracy.

2. E-democracy in theory and practice

E-democracy is commonly understood as the use of information and communications technologies (ICT) in democratic political and governance process [13,15]. According to Macintosh [18] e-democracy ‘... is concerned with the use of ICT to engage citizens, support the democratic decision-making processes and strengthen representative democracy’. This suggests that, in theory, ICT could play a role in supporting all phases of the democratic process (from engaging citizens and supporting decision-making, to strengthening representative structures and processes) or in transforming them. However, in practice, it appears that e-democracy applications are not applied in a uniform and consistent manner across political and institutional contexts as reflected in numerous earlier works including: e-voting [28,30], e-consultation [29], citizens online participation [26], political parties use of ICT [25], ICT role in recreating the public sphere [24], ICT role in the Parliament [9], ICT role in Public Administration [2,14,27], impact of the Internet on the structure of political information flow [3], democracy and computer mediated communication [1], direct democracy [4] and cyber-democracy [23]. ICT are employed to facilitate different democratic practices to different extents and for achieving different purpose (e.g. [5,6,8,13,16,17,19]). These works suggest that some government institutions employ ICT largely for broadcasting information to the public, whilst some others for consulting citizens and/or engaging them in discussing policy issues. In addition, information that is broadcast, the types of consultations or discussions offered and the extent to which they feed into the decision making process also vary between different institutional contexts. For example, regarding e-voting, Svensson and Leenes [28] state:

‘... This means that in different countries with different institutional contexts the decisions on whether or not to introduce a particular kind of e-voting are structured in different ways, and may lead to very different outcomes.” [28]

Commentators have also pointed to a number of institutional and social impediments in the way of e-democracy: including insufficient government enthusiasm for e-democracy and hence meager budgets allocated for it (e.g. institutions placing a greater emphasis on e-administration and e-services than e-democracy), reluctance from some politicians for enabling more direct models of democracy, digital divide and social exclusion, concerns over security and privacy, or citizens apathy (e.g. [6,7,17,19]). These impediments also play a part in limiting the role of e-democracy and moderating its implications in the democratic process.

In view of different applications of e-democracy and different surrounding institutional structures, Hoff et al. [14], and Hacker and Van Dijk [13] suggest that a range of Information Age models of democracy could emerge through the application of e-democracy. A synthesis of their models brings forward the following eight Information Age models of democracy (some of the models place a greater emphasis on strengthening the ‘demo’ side and others on the ‘kratos’ side of democracy): Participatory, Pluralist, Plebiscitary, Libertarian (or cyberdemocracy), Legalist (or constitutional), Competitive, Consumer model, and Demo-elitist (or neo-corporatist) model. Which of these model(s) will emerge and with what consequences for democracy, will be determined by a range of factors including the interplay of political context, institutional structures and agency of actors in the democratic process. Thus, informatization is
rather a complex phenomenon and needs to be understood within its surrounding political context, institutional regulations and priorities, and social structures that have enabling and constraining influences on human actors in how they engage in e-democracy practices (e.g. [2,8,16]).

3. E-democracy through the lens of structuration

A few earlier works (e.g. [14,22,28]) have suggested the usefulness of Giddens [12] structuration theory for examining e-democracy. The discussion below highlights the key tenets of Giddens theory for understanding social structures surrounding e-democracy.

Structuration theory contends that social practices constitute social reality, and not technology, institutions or agency and thus, it avoids either social or technological determinism. ICT are material resources, which on their own cannot act, but are instantiated in social practices. On their own, ICT have no social meaning until human actors in social practices appropriate them. Thus, according to this viewpoint, ICT infrastructure and systems have no social significance if they are not drawn upon and employed by human actors in meaningful social practices. By merely introducing ICT infrastructure, systems and informational resources into democratic processes does not signify enhancement or change in the way democracy is practiced until these are appropriated by human actors in the democratic process.

Social practices are recurrent human activities, emergent over time, which constitute and are constituted by social structures [12]. In the context of e-democracy, social practices include all kinds of purposeful activities that actors engage in through ICT facilities in the democratic process (e.g. accessing information, e-voting, e-discussions, e-consultations, e-petitioning, etc.). Social practices become routinized and recursive over time through the process of structuration. These practices can be also be analytically decomposed into their components of social structure and agency. Social structures are rules and resources and they provide a framework for social action. Thus, social structures facilitate actors in certain ways (e.g. enable access to democratic political information, or send an e-mail to an elected member, etc.) and also constrain them in other ways (e.g. through rules contained in ICT use policies, or the restrictions placed on accessing privileged information). The theory identifies three dimensions of social structures. These are structures of signification, domination and legitimation:

- **Structures of Signification**: These are structures (i.e. interpretive rules) that frame what constitutes social meaning, or understanding of action in social practices. An analysis of the structures of signification can help to elucidate the meanings actors attach to ICT in specific social processes (e.g. e-democracy process).
- **Structures of Legitimation**: These refer to structures that frame what constitutes morality (i.e. considered right and wrong conduct). These present a set of values and indicate what is expected to be normal behaviour, and what is considered as right or wrong in a particular situated social practice. Thus, structures of legitimation influence actors in how ICT are to be employed in e-democracy practices and for what purposes.
- **Structures of Domination**: Structures of domination become manifest through the resources that are allocated or withheld in social practices (e.g. in ICT design, development, or use) [10]. For example, as information is a vital resource of an organisation, ICT, through design, rules for its use or even through unintended consequences, could change the flows of information, and hence change the asymmetry of resources in an organisation (i.e. shift the balance of power).

Thus, a closer study of the dimensions of structure could provide insights into how actors are enabled and constrained in allocating resources, in designing ICT infrastructure and systems, in specifying rules
for the use of these resources in e-democracy, in revealing how actors draw on these resources to engage in e-democracy, as well as how the impact of ICT are moderated by these structures in e-democracy practices. Structures of signification, legitimation and domination would influence the meanings that are attached to ICT mediated political practices, as well as communication patterns and hence shape particular forms of e-democracy practices. Structuration theory also suggests that ICT role in the democratic process does not become reified once they are designed and implemented [20,21]. Rather, ICT implementation and use are shaped and reshaped through an on-going process of structuration – that is, through a continuous interplay of social structures and human agency. Thus, e-democracy practices could evolve or change through time due changing agency factors or institutional contexts.

Agency refers to the purposive actions of social actors. An examination of agency can assist in understanding the reciprocal influence of human actors on social structures in the technology process. Human actors can comply with rules for ICT use, modify, broaden or even change the way they design or appropriate ICT and hence introduce changes in social structures surrounding e-democracy. However, their actions are enabled or constrained by the specific context and social structures in which they operate. Giddens draws attention to three interrelated and interdependent dimensions of agency in social practices: communication of meaning, exercising (or not exercising) power and sanctioning behaviour. In their use of ICT in social processes, actors can be constrained in a number of ways. First, they can be constrained by the norms surrounding practices of democracy, which actors maybe aware. These would influence the strategies they bring to bear in their appropriation of e-democracy. Second, they are influenced by the norms that surround ICT use. Third, they are influenced by the way other actors use ICT in their institutional context. Fourth, they can be constrained by their own knowledge of ICT features, the skills they posses for using these facilities, or by their political interests.

4. Methodological issues

First, structuration theory suggests that social practices need to be investigated in their real life context. A case study method was therefore considered appropriate for this purpose. The theory also views social reality as both objective and subjective. For example, Orlikowski [20] suggests that technology is both objective, in that it is physically constructed by actors working in particular context, and also subjective in that it is socially constructed by actors through the meanings that they attach to it and the features they choose to emphasise in its use. This suggests that both objective and subjective data is required for understanding the phenomenon under investigation. Thus, appropriate methods for investigating e-democracy, from a structuration perspective, include observation of local authority websites and examination of official documentations (as objective data), and semi-structured interviews with key actors to elicit subjective data related to the meanings, purposes and experiences of actors in e-democracy process.

Second, researchers need to identify the social processes and social practices within these processes that are being investigated. For e-democracy, it is possible to define the social process in terms of the ICT systems development life cycle (i.e. e-democracy policy-making, design, implementation, use and evaluation). This broader process can be further refined into two distinct but interdependent social processes: e-democracy shaping process (which includes e-democracy policy, design and implementation) and e-democracy appropriation process. Parvez [22] has suggested two useful categories of structures surrounding e-democracy:
– **Institutional mediation structures**: These structures influence actors in shaping e-democracy and in how its impact is moderated, and include: the influence of rules surrounding the established model(s) and practices of democracy, as well as institutional objectives, priorities, and norms surrounding ICT design and development.

– **ICT mediation structures**: These structures influence actors in appropriating e-democracy, and include: the information and communications structures implemented through ICT, the influence of institutional norms for ICT use (e.g. ICT use policy), rules surrounding democratic practices, as well as knowledge, skills and what aspects of democratic politics actors have interests in.

Elucidation of these structures can reveal their enabling and constraining characteristics for actors, and thus, assist in identifying necessary policy interventions to change/modify these structures for enhancing the role of e-democracy.

Third, through the concept of methodological bracketing [12], social structures and agency can be examined separately at specific snap-shot in time. Data can be interpreted to elicit social structures from examining the structuring effects on agency; that is, what structures come into play in conditioning the actions of actors in specific social processes. Data can also be interpreted to elicit strategies employed by actors by examining the purposes they attach to specific social practices, how they exercise power and sanction behaviour in these practices. The discussion below focuses on the former; that is, on the structuring effects on agency in the e-democracy process.

The above points underpinned the methodology employed in a case study research. The structuration theory was employed as a sensitising device to guide data collection and provide a research focus. Specific issues were explored to elicit the institutional mediation structures and ICT mediation structures. Data was collected from three local authorities (Birmingham City Council, Wolverhampton City Council and Telford & Wrekin Council), all based within the West Midlands region of the UK, between February and August 2003.

The three local authorities differed in their organisational size, urban/rural mix, and the size of populations they served (see Appendix, Table 1). Data was collected through observations (of websites), official documentations (including Implementing E-Government Statements (IEG), ICT Plans, Best value Performance, Budget Details, Corporate Policy, Cabinet Statement, Community Strategy and ICT use policy) and semi-structured interviews involving more than one person in each institution. This allowed for corroboration of data and also acted as a check for consistency. The actors from whom data was collected were limited to: citizens (who interacted with local authorities via ICT), elected Members (from different political parties who employed ICT for democratic engagement) and local authority officers (Head of Policy, Head of ICT/Web Manager, Head of community strategy, and ICT support officers). The data collected were tabulated for making comparisons. Evidence was compared with the information presented in official documentations. It was also assessed for each local authority separately, and then between the three authorities. The findings were interpreted to draw out the underlying structures of signification, domination and legitimation surrounding e-democracy practices.

5. **Institutional mediation structures**

Data indicated that the three local authorities differed in some aspects of ICT infrastructure and systems, information provision, and e-democracy practices facilitated for actors to engage in, and also in their future ICT plans to support local democracy. This suggests a lack of national direction for the role of ICT in the democratic process. However, there were a number of similarities (which the subsequent
discussion focuses on) such as online access to official documents including minutes of Council meetings, Best Value Performance, budgets and information on elected Members, as well as facilities for e-mailing officers and (some) elected Members.

To elicit institutional mediation structures surrounding the shaping of e-democracy, the following specific issues were explored in the research:

– Drivers for ICT development in local authorities.
– Influence of external and internal pressures on local authorities that prioritise and shape ICT projects.
– ICT priorities and objectives of local authorities.
– ICT projects (including e-democracy projects) being developed.

A holistic interpretation of the data suggested that actors (i.e. e-democracy policy-makers and implementers), in general, perceived the following as key structuring influences that conditioned and framed how ICT were shaped in the local democratic process:

– The norms surrounding the established democratic model and democratic practices.
– External institutional pressures.
– Internal institutional pressures and objectives.

5.1. The dominant democratic model and practices

As UK local authorities are legally bound to work within the dominant political system (of representative/parliamentary democracy) of the country, e-democracy initiatives in all three local authorities fell within the framework of representative democracy. There was no evidence indicating that the representative model of democracy was being challenged by e-democracy projects. For instance, initiatives for e-democracy such as online consultations and discussion forums were only intended to provide support to, as well as enhance the representative model of democracy. The dominant political model, thus, directly imposed a framework around the application of ICT in local democracy. However, official documentation and majority of interviewees in all three local authorities acknowledged the apathy in the political culture and the importance of searching for innovative ways to address this. A few interviewees suggested the need to apply ICT for addressing this apathy and for extending and enhancing local democracy.

Councillor 3: “... ICT could play an important role in keeping local people informed of what is going on and give them an option to contact either councillors or officers to discuss issues... The introduction of e-voting and online consultations could assist in addressing the apathy in politics that is widespread in our society today. Also, councillors’ role should be strengthened in local democracy and not undermined through ICT.” (Telford & Wrekin Council).

Officer 1: “... Within representative democracy ICT could assist in enabling greater participation of the public in local affairs. A MORI poll conducted on behalf of Birmingham City Council indicated that 25% of the public are interested in greater participation in policy making.” (Birmingham City Council).

Data also suggested that the established procedures and practices of local democracy and governance influenced policy-makers in how ICT were to be applied in these processes. For illustration, provision of information on elected Members, council meetings and other democratic political information, together with online discussion forums and consultations were not intended to replace the established decision-making processes. There was also no evidence of plebiscites being implemented in any of the three local
authorities, which would indicate a challenge to established practices of policy-making. The intended use of ICT, as spelt out in official documentation, also fell within the framework of established procedures and practices of representative model of democracy. Thus, the established democratic governance practices acted as elements of structure that conditioned ICT implementation and moderated their impact on these processes. Structuration theory suggests that these structures, in the absence of any new vision are likely to be reproduced in e-democracy initiatives through the process of structuration. In view of this, gradual changes in democratic political practices are expected rather than radical changes.

5.2. External institutional pressures

Findings suggest that ICT plans of each local authority were significantly influenced by the UK’s Central Government agenda for Modernisation. The key influences highlighted by the official documentations and interviewees were the Best Value Performance indicators and the e-government agenda. Thus, local authorities appeared to place greater emphasis on developing ICT infrastructure for enabling electronic service delivery and improving the flow of information (e.g. for achieving greater integration and coordination of information within a local authority and with other public agencies). The IEG statements (implementing e-government statements) and other ICT plans reflected these prioritise in all three local authorities. Corporate ICT plans appeared to give little attention to the development of e-democracy projects. However, findings do suggest that a number of ad hoc e-democracy initiatives were underway. These initiatives were underpinned by concerns for addressing social exclusion, low voter turnout and linking partnership organisations to improve local governance (see Appendix, Table 1).

Data from interviews with Heads of ICT and Policy in the three local authorities indicated that the key policy makers were more concerned with meeting e-government targets and Best Value performance indicators than with enhancing local democracy (see Appendix, Table 1).

5.3. Internal institutional pressures

Internal pressures were also found to be important influencers on corporate priorities in the three local authorities, which in turn shaped ICT priorities and plans (see Appendix, Table 1). Besides resource constraints (e.g. budgets and the need for cost savings), internal institutional pressures also included pressures to improve internal coordination, continue with legacy projects and to improve public services (see Appendix, Table 1). For example, Telford & Wrekin Council placed an emphasis on legacy projects related to the enhancement of the national grid for learning (NGfl), Birmingham City Council on neighbourhood regeneration and addressing social exclusion, and Wolverhampton City Council placed emphasis on their Pathfinder Bereavement project. Even when laptop computers and printers were provided to local elected Members (e.g. as was the case at Telford and Wrekin Council), interviewees suggested that the provision of these resources was underpinned by cost-saving objectives rather than the enhancement of democracy.

6. ICT Mediation Structures of e-democracy practices

To elicit ICT mediation structures surrounding the appropriation of e-democracy, the following key issues were explored:

1. Information and communications structures supporting e-democracy.
2. The purposes for which actors appropriated e-democracy.
3. How actors found e-democracy useful.
5. Any concerns actors had regarding e-democracy.

A holistic view of the data suggested that actors (elected Members, citizens and officers), in general, perceived the following as key sources of social structures, which influenced and framed how e-democracy was appropriated by them in the local democratic process:

- Information and communications structures supporting e-democracy.
- ICT use policies.
- Personal factors (e.g. political interests of actors and their views about e-democracy).

6.1. Information and communications structures supporting e-democracy

Official documentation, examination of websites and interview data indicated that a number of digital channels were made available that facilitated access to a range of local information and communication between actors in the three local authorities. These included e-mail, websites, online consultations and discussion forums, and one-stop points for contacting local authorities. Although these appeared to be important developments, a closer examination of these e-practices revealed that they were reproducing established democratic practices in electronic forms rather than anything radical. ICT channels and systems have the potential to facilitate a range of other radical practices such as electronic town hall meetings, plebiscites, petitioning, and so on. However, there was no evidence that indicated that such practices were being supported in any of the three local authorities.

Councillor 2: “I use e-mail, laptop computer with Microsoft office and a printer, and the Internet. Also use ‘councillor advice case management system’.” (Birmingham City Council)

Councillor 2: “I use e-mail, Internet, Microsoft software package, and have own personal website.” (Wolverhampton City Council)

Citizen 2: “I access information on the main political parties and update myself on any developments in their policies. At times I have also accessed minutes of council meetings to see what they have decided on issues that I have been concerned about. I also try to lobby the appropriate councillors by sending them an e-mail regarding any issues that concerns me. In addition, I also keep a check on information related to local businesses that appears on the website of the local council.” (Birmingham City Council)

Citizen 3: “I like to surf the Internet. I also like to discuss things and present my views on issues and hence try to involve in online discussions that are set up by my local authority or by the websites of political parties and pressure groups.” (Wolverhampton City Council)

Citizen 5: “I mainly search for information on environmental issues, and contact organisations and people who are engaged in the process for addressing these – to raise issues and concerns with the local authority regarding urban parks and the more general environmental concerns.” (Telford & Wrekin Council)

Local authorities were opening up online channels for citizens along with traditional channels. The communication structures being implemented were primarily supporting a broadcast and asynchronous two-way communication flows in all three local authorities. This communications model enables access to local authority information, consultations and registration of views [13]. However, this model does not support interactive communications (i.e. conversational, two-way synchronous flows) that are required for
effective democratic engagement [13]. Thus, information traffic patterns that were dominant in off-line practices appeared to be largely reproduced in electronic communication structures, and the interactive capabilities of ICT did not appear to be exploited. These findings show how the established patterns of information flows and communication models exerted influence on the way ICT were implemented.

In addition, when data was viewed holistically, the information flow models implemented, the current online practices supported by ICT, and future plans for exploiting ICT, suggests that ICT support for officer-citizen and officer-councillor interaction was strong when compared to councillor-citizen, councillor-councillor and citizen-citizen interactions. This indicated that information flows were biased towards local authority officers, and were enabling them to play a central role in the flow of information and in online interactions between political actors. In other words, officers appeared to be gaining informational power. Moreover, officers exercised editorial control regarding the information that was placed on the web pages or passed through electronic documents between political actors (these officers were primarily from the ICT, public relations and/or chief executive departments). ICT officers were also directly involved in the management of ICT resources, they redirected e-mails, received and processed online discussions and consultations that took place, as well as decided what information resources were to be made available electronically to citizens and other actors. Access to important information systems such as Housing Information systems were denied even to elected Members (e.g. Telford & Wrekin Council).

Councillor 1: “Also, officers do not forward all information to us regarding how citizens are using the services. Information has to be requested all the time.” (Birmingham City Council)
Councillor 2: “No capacity to make changes to website information yourself – need authorisation from content managers. Some officers not using e-mail to respond to queries. There are also constraints on what systems we can access – need permission for this. There are restrictions for using ICT for personal use and for the work of the Party.” (Birmingham City Council)
Councillor 3: “Access to some systems is denied. We need to justify why we need to access certain systems for which we have no authorisation. For example, I sometimes need information on Housing or financial details, however, I have no access rights for these systems.” (Telford & Wrekin Council)

Moreover, the three local authorities were selective on the issues they opened up for democratic engagement. Citizens, in particular, had very little say in this matter and this hindered their engagement. This control over opening up issues via online channels also indicates the power of officers in online participation.

Citizen 2: “Also, on the Council’s website there appears to be more information on the local council and its services, and very little on political parties and their views on local issues. For this I need to access other websites ... Also, there are no links on the Council’s website to access political parties, pressure groups and community networks.” (Birmingham City Council)
Citizen 3: “... there are hardly any local community groups online that I can interact with.” (Wolverhampton City Council)
Citizen 5: “I would like to see discussions being initiated by citizens on issues that are of concern to them and not only the local authority. For example, I have not seen any online consultations regarding the community strategy.” (Telford & Wrekin Council)

6.2. ICT use policies

These policies were produced by all three local authorities and appeared to enable, but also hinder democratic engagement between political actors in some ways. As an illustration, these policies only
permitted ICT use for institutional work rather than for wider democratic engagement (e.g. elected Members were not permitted to use institutional ICT resources for engaging in party political work).

Councillor 2: “Difficult to separate Internet use for personal, Council and political party issues. However, Council insists that ICT are not used for personal or political party’s use. There are also restrictions on the use of the Internet. All councillors have to sign the Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) before they are given authorisation to use ICT. Some councillors I know are refusing to sign this as they feel that they will be greatly restricted in their use of e-mail and the Internet. Otherwise no other problems as I use ICT a lot at my work.” (Telford and Wrekin Council)

A closer examination of the ICT acceptable use policies revealed that they were influenced by earlier policies, which saw ICT as merely tools for supporting internal operations. These policies, thus, took an internal and legal view of ICT use and intended to prevent the abuse of these technologies by actors. However, the new ICT have capabilities that can blur or erode organisational boundaries and enable information flows across institutions and with a wide range of political actors outside institutional boundaries. ICT use policies, being structured by the established norms for ICT use, did not reflect this new reality.

6.3. Personal factors

Data suggested that personal factors also framed actors in their use of e-democracy. For example, different actors viewed e-democracy facilities from the perspective of their own specific needs and political interests. As an illustration, officers raised concerns about addressing social exclusion, the need to support representative democracy, and the need for opening up democratic process to prevent citizens from disengaging from mainstream politics.

Officer 1: “… The neighbourhood managers are trying to strengthen community networks and ICT could also play a role here. However, it is not envisaged that local authorities would help in any way to strengthen pressure groups or the work of political parties … Community networks – these would assist in social inclusion as well as increase community participation. However, anarchist type of online politics must be avoided … Ideas also are floating on how ICT could support local councillors. Many are very reluctant to use ICT at the moment … ICT are also being applied to improve service provision, to understand citizens’ service needs and how best these could be met. There are efforts into using ICT for improving CRM (customer relationship management). Also for developing stronger links with strategic partnership organisations in order to engage partners and stakeholders in planning and policy-making.” (Wolverhampton City Council)

A few elected Members were beginning to use ICT for enhancing their effectiveness and reach to citizens. Examples include the following: elected Members accessing remote information directly via the Internet in order to learn about developments related to local authorities (at Telford & Wrekin Council); elected Members communicating with officers and citizens through e-mail (at Telford & Wrekin Council); elected Members building direct access to citizens through establishing community e-groups (at Wolverhampton City Council). Thus, elected Members desired to see ICT empowering them to become more effective and central in the policy process. Some also pointed to the restrictions placed on them by the ICT use policy.

Councillor 1: “… Councillors should have access to better information and online communication facilities so that they can become more effective in dealing with issues raised by citizens and also be well prepared for meetings where decisions are made.” (Birmingham City Council)
Councillor 2: “... the restrictions on their use of the Internet should be addressed. They need to interact with other councillors and also the members of the constituencies. They also need to interact with their political parties to discuss issues online and access information in order to become effective in their role ... ICT systems need to be designed in consultation with councillors ... Systems that are designed to their needs will be used.” (Telford & Wrekin Council)

Citizens indicated a need for greater participation in online consultations and deliberations on policy issues, and be able to have a say on what issues were opened up through online channels. Other constraining factors highlighted by citizens included: online costs, lack of online community networks, and online space for direct discussions with other citizens and elected Members. Some mentioned that they encountered difficulties during search for information on specific topics. This directs attention to the importance of better strategies for content management on websites.

Citizen 1: “... There should also be special online discussion spaces that are accessible via the local authority’s website on separate issues such as education, social work, housing, etc. In these spaces, citizens who are interested, councillors responsible for that specific issue as well as officers should all be in continuous interaction in order to develop and improve policy and its delivery in that specific area ...” (Birmingham City Council)

Citizen 3: Cost of telephone line. Slow speed of the Internet ... Also, there are hardly any local community groups online that I can interact with. (Wolverhampton City Council)

Citizen 4: “More support from local authorities in developing community networks. More issues of policy to be opened up for online public consultation. Local authorities and also the councillors need to get closer to the citizens, and ICT could assist in this process.” (Wolverhampton City Council)

7. Discussion of findings

In summary, the above findings bring to attention the importance of the following social structures that influence actors in the e-democracy shaping and appropriation processes within the context of UK local authorities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Mediation Structures</th>
<th>ICT Mediation Structures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The norms surrounding the established democratic model and practices</td>
<td>• Information and communications structures supporting e-democracy practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• External institutional pressures</td>
<td>• ICT use policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Internal institutional pressures and objectives</td>
<td>• Personal factors (e.g. ICT skills, resource constraints, political interests of actors, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, any efforts for enhancing local democracy through the support of ICT resources need to take the influence of these structuring categories into consideration. Most of these structures were not very evident from official documentations. Although these structures cannot be generalised, they do assist in highlighting some general issues for e-democracy policy. The following discussion attempts to make sense of these structures in light of the dimensions of social structures suggested by Giddens structuration theory (i.e. structures of signification, legitimation and domination).

7.1. Structures of signification

First, at the institutional level, efforts of the local authorities focused on employing ICT to support the Modernisation Agenda and on addressing external and internal pressures impinging on them. There
appeared to be no shared understanding between actors on the role ICT should play in democratic governance process, both within each institution and across the three institutions. Second, the types of e-democracy practices emerging were influenced by the meanings held by policy makers on ‘democratic engagement’. ‘Democratic engagement’ was generally understood within the framework of the established representative model of democracy, and this influenced the way ICT were applied. Local authorities placed an emphasis on providing access to information, and to online consultations and discussions to a limited extent. Not enough emphasis was placed on employing ICT for more participatory forms of engagement (e.g. to enable policy deliberation and engage citizens in decision-making). On the whole ICT were considered as tools to speed up communication and for sending and receiving documentation. Not enough attention was paid to the interactive capabilities of ICT that are important for conversational, two-way synchronous flows of communication, and which is necessary for democratic engagement. For example, findings revealed that ICT played a very minimal role (such as information processing and production of documentations) in the important process of formulating community strategies in the three local authorities.

To move forward towards a coherent e-democracy strategy, a shared understanding of e-democracy between policy makers is essential. The UK Central Government together with local authorities need to build a clear vision, through wider consultations, regarding the role of ICT and which model(s) of democracy should be realised through the support of these technologies. This vision needs to be communicated clearly between local authority policy makers. A lack of a clear vision will lead to ad hoc e-democracy initiatives and fragmented policy, as was the case at the time of this research. Central Government directives have a considerable influence on local authorities’ corporate priorities. It is therefore important that the vision for e-democracy is clarified, driven and monitored by the central Government, as is currently the case with the e-government agenda.

7.2. Structures of legitimation

First, ICT priorities and plans were legitimised (or justified) on the basis that they address Central Government’s directives and respond to local external and internal pressures. Second, the application of ICT to realise joined-up government, developing strategic partnerships, and for improving service delivery was justified on the basis of the e-government agenda. However, the use of ICT for enabling a participatory form of democracy lacked similar justification. E-democracy initiatives were difficult to justify on the basis of institutional objectives such as reducing costs and improving integration and coordination of information flows. Thus, for e-democracy to be taken seriously and initiatives in this direction to be considered justified, it needs to be placed onto the corporate agenda and explicit plans need to be formulated for its realisation. Third, the rules outlined in the ICT acceptable use policies were justified on the basis of the institutional norms for ICT use. However, these rules affected democratic engagement of actors (as discussed above). They need to be revisited, developed or moderated in light of the powerful capabilities of the new ICT (e.g. networking properties of ICT that blur organisational boundaries). Moreover, views of citizens, elected Members and a broader meaning of ‘democratic engagement’, need to be incorporated into ICT use policies so as to facilitate wider participation through e-democracy. Thus, a change in the structures of legitimation could enable local authorities to become active and relevant hubs of local democracy and encourage engagement through e-democracy.

7.3. Structures of domination

First, evidence suggested that ICT plans were formulated and implemented through a top-down approach. Officers in the policy-making process exerted a considerable influence on institutional ICT
plans. Backbench elected Members as well as citizens had little input into these plans. Second, evidence suggested that officers were becoming central in the flows of information within local authorities and between citizens and other stakeholders. These emerging structures of domination could reduce the role of elected Members or even marginalize them from important e-democracy policy activities. In view of this, it is important to introduce changes in structures of domination. Policy needs to address this imbalance in informational power for e-democracy to play a more important role in local democracy. For the success of any e-democracy strategy, the involvement of officers, elected Members and citizens is essential and need to be encouraged. They need to be invited to discussions, involved in the e-democracy policy-making process and encouraged to identify their information and communications needs, training needs as well as ICT facilities and systems they require for effective democratic engagement. Policy for e-democracy also need to take into consideration the type of online practices facilitated, the issues opened up for democratic political engagement, as well as who should have the power to decide these issues. In particular, online issues opened up for discussions need to be meaningful, relevant and interesting in order to engage different political actors.

8. Conclusions

The paper aimed to demonstrate the usefulness of structuration theory for understanding structures surrounding e-democracy shaping and appropriation processes. The insights gained from the interpretation of case study data through the lens of structuration theory, bring out the following important points for e-democracy:

1. Insights gained did not support either utopian views of the emergence of an Athenian style direct democracy, or dystopian scenario of the emergence of an Orwellian society through the application of ICT. The findings rather suggested that e-democracy played a minimal role in local democracy within the context of the three UK local authorities that were examined. An elucidation of structures of signification, legitimation and domination illuminated why this was so – by showing how different ways actors were enabled and constrained in the e-democracy shaping and appropriation processes. Insights supported the view that ICT were exploited to reproduce established democratic governance practices, which were likely to change gradually through increasing engagement by actors and through dialectics of control (i.e. through negotiation/conflicts/tensions for the control of ICT resources and applications). The social structures elicited suggested that on the whole ICT were playing a facilitating/supporting role in local democracy. There was little evidence that pointed to a substantive/innovative role. There was no evidence of any radical changes that challenged traditional representative democratic practices. On the contrary, ICT were playing a greater role in realising e-government plans than for enhancing local democracy. In view of this, for e-democracy to be taken seriously, it needs to be brought onto the policy agenda of local authorities, which should provide a clearer understanding of what role ICT are to play in local democratic governance process and how this is to be realised.

2. Insights demonstrated the importance of giving consideration to the interplay of institutional context, social structures and agency issues in e-democracy, for developing a deeper understanding of its role and implications on local democracy. This suggests the opening up of the narrow technology-driven policymaking frameworks in public administration, and the need to give considerations to wider institutional and social issues that surround e-democracy. In particular, the social structures that human actors perceive need to be illuminated to understand their enabling and constraining
characteristics on human agency and their implications on democracy. ICT policy needs to take these issues into consideration in order to increase the effectiveness of ICT resources that are being embedded in local governments.

The paper also demonstrated the usefulness of categorising social structures into institutional mediation structures (that influence actors in shaping e-democracy) and ICT mediation structures (that influence how actors appropriate e-democracy) for analytical purposes. These analytical categories of social structures assist in examining e-democracy shaping process separately from e-democracy appropriation process. However, over a course of time, in light of Giddens theory, these categories of structures influence each other through the process of structuration. The institutional reflexivity (monitoring or feedback mechanisms) on e-democracy appropriation would in turn, influence future ICT infrastructure and systems design, hence the shape of e-democracy.

Finally, future research from a structuration perspective needs to examine agency issues in e-democracy shaping and appropriation processes. That is, research needs to investigate the strategies human actors (i.e. agency) bring to bear in e-democracy practices and how they are enabled and constrained by social structures surrounding these practices. This would provide further insights into agency issues surrounding e-democracy.

References


### Appendix

Table 1: Case study data for the three local authorities (data for year 2003).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birmingham City Council</th>
<th>Wolverhampton City Council</th>
<th>Telford and Wrekin Council</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type</strong></td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organisational size (number of employees)</strong></td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>12,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population</strong></td>
<td>977,087</td>
<td>236,582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key drivers for ICT development in local authorities</strong></td>
<td>Pressure from national government. Improve service provision. Improve efficiency / cost-effectiveness of information and service delivery. Improve provision of information to citizens</td>
<td>Pressure from national government. Improve service provision. Improve provision of information to citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>External pressures on local authorities</strong></td>
<td>Pressure for neighbourhood renewal and addressing social exclusion – community strategy. Pressure to find more effective ways to service the large population of Birmingham. Devolution towards local areas – neighbourhood management. Meeting service and information demands from citizens – need for more openness. Best value – national performance agenda. Implementing E-government agenda. Open government – Freedom of Information Act</td>
<td>Growth of district and the need to find extra resources to serve this growth. Wealth creation and the need for skilled workforce. Combating poverty and social exclusion. Developing modern and effective Council via e-government, restructuring and best value performance. Implementing Government’s modernisation agenda – IEG and community strategy. Pressure from citizens to access local authority’s information and to provide electronic channels for communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internal pressures on local authorities</strong></td>
<td>Need for an integrated ICT strategy (moving away from departmental approach) – and manage culture change as a result of this. Demand for better coordination between service areas and departments. Demand for greater autonomy by front-line staff – to access consistent and coherent information to assist in dealing with enquiries and issues and for making decisions</td>
<td>On-going efforts to improve efficiency across projects. On-going efforts to improve co-ordination – information flow between relevant individuals – between services and administration and management functions. Issues raised by restructuring – such as the need for co-ordination and managing the culture change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ICT priorities and objectives of local authorities</strong></td>
<td>Achieving cost-effectiveness to meet best value performance indicators – ICT as a tool for this. E-government plans (IEG statement). Providing access to Council’s information and services – addressing social exclusion. Linking back-office and front-office processes in order to improve customer relationship management. Changing corpor</td>
<td>Improve service provision to citizens. Meet government targets in given areas. Most importantly, e-government, joined-up government, electronic provision of services to citizens by 2005, develop and implement a community strategy and best value performance plan. Webocracy project – enhancing democracy through exploiting technology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E-government: development of core infrastructure, telephony, web-enabled services, use of Internet, Intranet and e-mail. ICT to support community strategy and best value performance plan. Interconnected communities: taking advantage of National Grid for Learning (NGfL) and use of Broad band to link schools, parents as well as partner institutions. Information technology action plan – developing e-government strategies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birmingham City Council</th>
<th>Wolverhampton City Council</th>
<th>Telford and Wrekin Council</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Important ICT application areas and projects in local authorities</td>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information management via ICT – to improve information access, coordination, interfacing and security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rate systems – Improvements to MIS and GIS systems. Pursuing the development of the Birmingham Grid for Learning</td>
<td>Improve efficiency of service provision – cost effectiveness and managing performance. Improve efficiency of administration and management – also introduce Intranet. Better access to Council’s information. Take advantage of NGfL to connect communities – Also upgrade infrastructure to support NGfL and also for interconnected communities and customer strategies. Developing GIS further (to be accessible from website). Implementing standard desktop. Electronic document management. All councilors to have access to a computer, e-mail and the Web</td>
<td>Implement e-government strategy. Improve efficiency of service provision – cost effectiveness and managing performance. Improve efficiency of administration and management – also introduce Intranet. Better access to Council’s information. Take advantage of NGfL to connect communities – Also upgrade infrastructure to support NGfL and also for interconnected communities and customer strategies. Developing GIS further (to be accessible from website). Implementing standard desktop. Electronic document management. All councilors to have access to a computer, e-mail and the Web</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realise the ‘Birmingham Egg’ vision: Focus on greater linking with partner organisations, and greater internal information sharing. Implement IEG statement. This includes: improve efficiency of service provision, improve efficiency of administration and management. Corporate contact centre (will consolidate existing contact centres). Redesign and development of corporate website. Extending e-learning opportunities via BGfL. Electronic service delivery. Information management (GIS, Electronic document management, and data warehousing systems). ICT enabled procurement</td>
<td>Electronic service delivery. Enhancing the corporate website with a sophisticated content management system. Extending the libraries and schools networks to provide points of access across the city. Further developing the e-procurement system</td>
<td>Implement e-government strategy. Improve efficiency of service provision – cost effectiveness and managing performance. Improve efficiency of administration and management – also introduce Intranet. Better access to Council’s information. Take advantage of NGfL to connect communities – Also upgrade infrastructure to support NGfL and also for interconnected communities and customer strategies. Developing GIS further (to be accessible from website). Implementing standard desktop. Electronic document management. All councilors to have access to a computer, e-mail and the Web</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>