Digital Empowerment as a Process for Enhancing Citizens' Participation

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ABSTRACT The author proposes a citizen-and community-oriented approach to using information technology, whereby people are considered as participant members of the society. This empowering approach views people as subjects and actors who have abilities to develop, not as objects who lack these abilities and need one-way help from authorities. Empowerment of individuals and communities means increased control over life and coping skills. With information technology people gain new abilities and ways to participate and express themselves in a networked society. This can be called digital empowerment, which is not a direct consequence of having and using the technical facilities, but a multi-phased process to gain better networking, communication and cooperation opportunities, and to increase the competence of individuals and communities to act as influential participants in the information society. In this article empowerment is used in the sense of enablement – enabling people to do what is important to them, and enabling people to grow as competent subjects who have control over their lives and surroundings. When added to policies and programmes, this approach could bridge some of the democratic, cultural and content divides by bringing in more aspects.

People as Receivers of the Information Society

The main discourse and official rhetoric on the information society are described in terms of technological and economical determinism, like threat or challenge. Development of the information society seems inevitable; we can't afford to avoid it, we must face it, and adapt to its requirements. The development is rarely questioned, despite the fact that the abstract rhetoric fails to clarify where we are heading. The concept of the information society is vague and the citizen is almost forgotten. However, the main point of the message is dynamic development, which we have to be part of, otherwise we are lost.

The deterministic and outside-led discourse can be explained by one-way authorial policy making, which leads to a patronizing and non-questionable attitude. The policy making of the information society is top-down from the authorities to the people, who receive and do not participate. The other explanation is the high levels of appreciation for markets and economic values, which supports market-driven development. Technology is partnering with the markets, which is financing new innovations, and this technology–market partnership is being allowed to manage the development much more than some of the other actors in the society, like social or cultural players.

As a consequence of this top-down approach and the technology–market-driven orientation, the information society is mainly implemented as (a) authoritarian policies and (b) services for customers.

The information society's policies represent authorities' reactivity in trying to get control over the situation. The e-strategy discourse creates visions, faith in the strengths of global markets, and ways to overcome the weaknesses. From the official strategies' point of view, peoples' roles involve adapting to the changing circumstances and receiving services from authorities. This non-

questioning adaptation is a consequence of top-down thinking and the requirements of the markets. People are mainly identified as users, customers, consumers and citizens, sometimes e-citizens. The common function for all these roles, from the standpoint of official rhetoric, is to *adapt* and *receive*.

Adaptive roles can be defined in relation to external and changing circumstances, which people have to integrate into. The conditions of the information society require continuous learning, updating of skills and knowledge, and the ability to cope with new technology. To conquer the challenges of the information society and a competitive economy, people have to invest in technical equipment and training so they can use and decode the contents of new communication technology. People are seen as inferior to circumstances and powerless to change them.

In adaptive roles people are considered users of infrastructure and contents, and they are presumed to have user skills, but not too much participatory, planning or criticizing ability. The user may react, but s/he still remains in the role of user, not creator. Even when we talk about user-centred design as an ideal model to consider the needs of people, actually 'the norms and profiles of the information society use the user, and this way aims at producing desired individuals in society' (Peltola, 2003, p. 61). The rhetoric of information society programs offers a very mechanistic role model for citizens, calling them users or consumers who should learn to use new technology and become competitive.

The public administrations take the responsibility for supporting citizens' adaptation in the information society by offering some possibilities to access and use technical infrastructure, such as the Internet. This is usually the only way the administrations try to prevent the digital divides. Thus the support is directed to accessing technology, using technology, and receiving different services by using the new tools. If citizens break away from their user roles, they are easily considered as a threat, and are labeled hackers or troublemakers. User-citizens are usually measured quantitatively, either by the number of times they access the Internet, by the number of email accounts or by the volume of using services, not by their interest in the possibilities of Internet or by the meaning of technology in their everyday life. If digital equality or inequality is only quantitatively measured, it fails to convey the whole situation.

My intention here is not to underestimate the ability to adapt, which is an important skill, but to show how one-sided and narrow this adapting user-citizen's role is. If people are seen only in this adaptive user-citizen's role, they are seen from the top down, and not as subjects who participate and can make differences in society.

The other verb describing people's role in the information society concerns receiving. People *receive* their role by buying, using, consuming and accepting things offered from the top down. The public administration or media do not seem to recognize people in initiating and active roles, or as cooperators. Citizens are patronized, informed and offered things in a one-way manner. Therefore citizens as receivers do not act as having complete control over their lives.

In a receiving role people are called consumers, customers, users or the public. Even in citizens' role, people are also mainly considered as receiving and adapting subjects to the power (Karvonen, 2001). The receiving role can be described as being either an object or a target of activities, not a subject or actor. People are also getting used to their receiving role, demanding the ready-made services of the society, thereby becoming too passive to make an effort themselves.

The reasons leading to the receiving role of people in society can be found in the authoritarian and patronizing mentality, as well as in market-driven values combined with individualistic values. The activities of the receiving citizen are connected to his/her choices as a customer or user, not to activities as an influential and competent citizen. The receiving role is also connected to purchasing power – what and how much a person is able to buy. In this individualistic culture people are more and more 'buying their lives', they are fulfilling their needs and desires by using money (Webster, 2000). In that way, the role of people is drawing closer to the consumer-identity offered by markets. Thus the markets are creating needs rather than satisfying them. This consumer-centred mentality is naturally causing an inequality among people. If, for example, the quality of information is defined by economic purchasing power, some citizens may become information poor in a sense of having access only to 'garbage information', which entertains and sells, but does not have much informational value (Webster, 2000). It seems also that the Internet is part of the new division of welfare, and it will become more and more an arena for consumption (Sassi, 2003).

Citizens' adapting and receiving roles seem narrow. Citizenship in a one-way role of enjoying citizen's rights to receive and to be subsidized is not leading to a cooperative society. Citizenship in a sense of active participation requires skills and competence in order to have an influential role in society. Thus I propose a *role of participant subject* as an aim of citizenship, which includes a feeling of controlling one's life and having enough competence to collaborate significantly to make changes in society.

Included, Excluded or Digitally Divided?

> I imagine one could say: 'Why don't you leave me alone?! I want no part of your Internet, of your technological civilization, of your network society! I just want to live my life!' Well, if this is your position, I have bad news for you. If you do not care about the networks, the networks will care about you, anyway. For as long as you want to live in society, at this time and in this place, you will have to deal with the network society. (Castells, 2002)

Are adapting and receiving citizens considered included or excluded in the information society? From the economic-administrative perspective, an adapting citizen who can use technical services fluently is doing well: he/she has the knowledge, skills and qualifications to be successful in a competitive economy. Mostly the problem of inequality (digital divide) is defined as lacking the skills and opportunities to access digital services.

Digitally marginalized citizens are usually described as people who are in unequal positions concerning the use of information technology, such as the Internet. The term 'digital divide' is commonly used to describe the unequal and marginalizing development in the information society (e.g. Heinonen et al, 2003). However, the thematic of the digital divide continues mostly with the discourse of people in their adapting and receiving roles. The digital divide is measured quantitatively, e.g. by the Internet penetration of the area, or by the volume of online services consumed, even though some researchers have added other views, such as the aspects of social and democratic inequality (e.g. Norris, 2001).

The 'haves' and 'have-nots' division is not quite adequate, because it can describe only the receiving aspect of the problem. There are more ambiguous factors, such as motivational, social, cultural and individual matters, affecting the situation. The ways of applying new technology vary in different contexts, and the technology itself may not be necessary for everyone. There are a number of people who choose not to use new technical tools and, if they did, it would not increase their equality in society. The discourse of haves and have-nots, or information rich and poor, is quite simplified and represents one-way mechanistic thinking.

In fact a person who may statistically be defined as digitally disadvantaged or a dropout can feel quite competent as a member of the society, if he/she is able to participate influentially without using new technology and if applying technology would not make significant improvement in the person's life. However, since the new information and communication technology is daily becoming more influential in the economy and in various areas of life, more and more people are taking advantage of it. If we try to create more equality by digital bridges, we may bridge technical gaps, but not necessarily the inequality gaps of participation in society. The best way to improve digital balance in society is to use the digital bridges to support and complement the other development work done at the grassroots level.

Bridging gaps by technical digital bridges is not quite enough to include people as influential members of the information society. Because of the one-way receiving sense, it would rather support the mainstreaming of new media, which today seems to be a 'remarking' trend (Lievrouw, 2004), and which has consequences such as cultural integration and decreasing diversity of perspectives.

Digital exclusion describes the inequality of people better than division into haves and have-nots. An included person of the information society feels like a full member of the community or society, and he/she has the competence to influence with or without using the new technology. An excluded person does not have these possibilities or the necessary competence. People who decide not to use digital technology do not belong to the group of disadvantaged or excluded, and neither do the people who could not substantially improve their well-being by using the new technology.

The excluded people of the information society are the ones who could increase their welfare and prospects by using the information technology, but who don't have the chance or ability to use it. Excluded people are also the ones who are weakened or deprived by the information society and its characteristics such as consequences of globalization. They are also the ones who are only in receiving and consuming roles, and who do not feel full participation in social decision-making processes.

Towards Participation and Collective Activities

People are more willingly accepted as consumers than as active citizens, who are viewed somewhat suspiciously. The receiving consumer role is more painless than the participatory role; it does not demand much effort to study, form opinions or debate. As a consumer one doesn't have to worry about being labelled as an activist, which is quite often understood as being something negative and weird. Taking a participatory and agentive citizen's role is also inconvenient for an authoritarian administration, which doesn't have the organizational tools or practices for direct citizen participation.

Since it is more convenient to adapt into the receiving role, people begin to identify themselves as consumers rather than citizens, they forget about their potential to influence common issues, and they begin expecting authorities to take care of solving any problem that may arise. This kind of *learned dependence* has clearly increased in the information society (Servaes, 1999, p. 202). However, it is not usually referred to as dependence, but, quite to the contrary, as increased freedom.

Receiving citizenship and dependence on an expertise solution to the problems is related to authoritarian politics, while participatory citizenship represents acting in a more democratically led society. Jan Servaes makes a similar division into two typical models of policy making: *the mechanistic model* and *the organic model*. Conventional strategies represent the diffusion-mechanistic model, whereas participatory strategies are more organic, spiritually oriented and human. In a mechanistic model people are seen as targets – that is, as objects of policy making – whereas from an organic model's point of view, people are actors – that is, subjects of policy making. Mechanistic leadership is authoritarian decision making, and organic leadership is cooperational, delegating and receptive. From a mechanistic viewpoint the motive for cooperation is the idea that people need outside help, and participation is a means to achieve ends. In an organic model the motive for cooperation is empowerment and helping people become able to help themselves. Participation is characterized as a never-ending process (Servaes, 1999, pp. 187-205). Figure 1 is an example of Jan Servaes' division into two typical models of policy making with overall objectives (Servaes, 1999, pp. 194-195).

Participation is quite popular in research and policy making discourse. One can hardly argue against the concept, even though it is difficult to promote in practice. There are obstacles for participatory policy making, such as the inherency of conflict and the tendency to 'promote rapid expansion of highly structured program models that emphasize quantitative targets and quick evaluation' (Servaes, 1999, p. 196). The ends are superior over the process and means. The conventional mechanistic model if followed seems more effortless and efficient.

Participatory citizenship requires both a new attitude towards cooperation and relearning new practices to act. A citizen should become visible not only for the administration, but also for himself/herself. We accept quite often the identities offered for us, and thus we resign ourselves to a non-participatory position (Sassi, 2000, p. 6). Besides the organic policy making, we need training for participatory citizenship.

Learning the skills of participatory citizenship in the information society is often called developing e-readiness. However, since this e-readiness is defined mainly as the skills of receiving and using, it is not enough for influential participation in society. Participation from a perspective of mechanistic policy making, for example as queries for the citizens, cannot include people in decision-making processes. At the worst the participation is only ostensible. Growing towards active citizenship is not only learning the 'e-readiness skills', but also learning to act as a subject, who has an equal role in interaction. Growing towards participatory citizenship is not only an

individualistic process, where a person learns useful skills for himself/herself, but also an interactive learning process in the context of one's environment and community.

Mechanistic Model		Organic Model
	Motive for Cooperation:	
People need to be helped		People are able to help themselves
Charity		Empowerment
	Assumption about target group:	
People lack abilities and resources to develop themselves		People do have abilities to develop themselves
They are helpless		These can be mobilized
	Attitude towards problems:	
Problem solving		Problem posing
	Attitude towards participation:	
Means to achieve ends		A never-ending process
	Objective of policy makers or researchers:	
Implementation of project objectives		Striving toward a common vision and understanding of self-development
	Learning relationship:	
Teacher-student; know-all versus know-nothing		Everyone is teacher and student at the same time; everybody has something of interest to share
Paternalistic		Empathic
	Valuation of knowledge:	
Western knowledge is superior		Traditional knowledge is equally relevant

Figure 1. Jan Servaes divides policy making into the mechanistic model and the organic model. Conventional strategies represent the diffusion-mechanistic model, whereas participatory strategies are more organic.

Citizens' activities in society can be of different kinds and levels. People act in their communities, in civic groups and in organizations; they may use institutional channels or try direct action. The activities can be political, concerning specific issues, communal activities in neighbourhoods or participating in wider social networks. Civic action in online networks can be grouped into different levels of difficulty: (1) *using online services*, such as city officials' information services; (2) *interacting online*, such as discussing with the officials about city planning; and (3) *producing information online*, such as writing an article concerning city planning. The easiest forms of online action are related to receiving and using, more demanding ones require interaction and the most demanding forms require the abilities to create and provide new contents. The essential difference between these levels is a change from receiving object to a self-expressive actor.

The more ready and capable people are to participate, the more competent they are to be influential in their society and to improve their environment. The levels of action may divide people, leaving 'the receiver-users' marginalized and without being heard. The readiness to participate meaningfully requires both technical abilities and civic knowledge about how to influence decision-making. Seija Ridell refers to civic action in society as public activism (Ridell, 2002). Thus active citizenship is connected to discussions about the public sphere, the virtual public

sphere and civic action in these environments. Public activism requires good cooperation and participation skills.

Being involved and included in the information society requires cooperation in social networks. Many activist movements and communities have been using the Internet to pursue their purposes for many years. These days there are many online communities forming which have social influence without having any physical group activities. For instance, the anti-globalization movement represents the social activity particularly happening in online networks (Castells, 2002, p. 142). Social movements and activist groups are more and more involved in online networks, even if they have local existence. Thus local (communal) activity is connected to broader and international networks, which makes it more influential and powerful. If individual activities are channelled through these networks, a person involved with them gets his/her views heard more easily while trying to make a social impact. Broad networking contacts are essential for a person's activities and social participation. Without the contacts, participation and influential activism are more difficult or even impossible. Thus we could presume the networking society to be dividing into 'contact rich' and 'contact poor' (Peltola, 2003, p. 59).

Digital Empowerment in Enhancing Citizen Inclusion in Society

The informational and operational networks are elemental parts of the information society and its functions. Information has a significant exchange value, and the access to both information and social communication is crucial for many kinds of welfare and cooperation. Manuel Castells talks about information capitalism, which means that global information capital is becoming more and more the basis for economics in the information society. The other significant trend and consequence of the new information technology is widening communicational networking. Thus we can call the post-industrial society, not only the information society, but also the network society or communication society.

Information technology can create a framework for interaction and multidimensional communication, even though the technology itself is not interactive. Technology can be used to serve social networks, which are quite often hierarchical and form strong and weak information flows. The strongest information flows are usually forming between the strongest parties (i.e. nodes), and thus they become the dominating centres of the networks, while some other places stay less popular and become marginalized. These marginalized places and people are usually not reached by new communication technology and its interaction. The Internet supports first the ones who are already influential, such as the existing power structures, so the networks themselves do not empower anyone without some special activating inclusion efforts.

However, Internet technology can very well be utilized for empowerment and enriching participation by diversifying the information flows, empowering horizontal communication and by opening new digital bridges to marginal or remote areas and people. Digital technology can be used as a tool for unprivileged people to reach the informational, social and economic capital of the social networks more easily than before. In the area of communication this empowerment can happen by investing in: 1) *sharing information*, not only one-way broadcasting; 2) opening *possibilities to publish* different views; 3) launching *equal discussion* forums; and 4) arranging *opportunities to influence* policy making.

Internet technology is a magnificent tool for sharing information. Open network environments accumulate information; it can be edited and reformulated, and it can be potentially used by anyone without diminishing its value. Multidimensional information sharing enables communities and individuals to become information providers. Thus we can avoid one-way information flows becoming too monopolistic and powerful.

Online publishing has opened totally new possibilities for people to express their views and opinions in public. Many activist groups, social movements and communities can display their views on critical issues concerning them. However, if these information flows are not widely considered, their publicity value is negligible.

Online discussion is a potential arena for sharing views in an equal way. Interaction between different stakeholders is an essential prerequisite for democratic policy making, so every citizen should have the possibility to participate in the decision-making processes at their different stages,

and this requires equal dialogue. To make discussions productive for all parties, the main challenge of online discussions is to get everyone concerned involved.

Having influence on social issues by using digital technology is possible only if people and decision makers are ready to accept the online environment as a place for serious participation in policy making. One-way efforts are not successful, but the concept and new courses of action should be accepted by every stakeholder and participant. An online system for citizens to make initiatives and follow them up during the decision-making processes could be one kind of model for a concept which increases influential empowerment (see, for example, an application for initiatives by the Mansetori project in Tampere city [Hokka et al, 2004]).

For participatory democracy, people should be able to act as subjects (power with), not only as receiving objects (power over). Participatory citizens act also in the roles of developers, and they are able to have dialogical conversations with decision makers. The information society offers many potential ways to participate, such as those connected with online publishing and interaction, but at the same time citizens meet new challenges. E-citizens should have enough technical competence and readiness for online communication, and should know the formal methods for citizen participation. Though the number of ways to participate is more than before, the threshold for participation is even higher.

The amount of active citizens is small and often elitist; for most people the way to participate is in a narrow receiving role, or as Sinikka Sassi describes it, a role of chooser and complainer. Even though choosing and complaining can lead to some impact, they are characterized as fixing up things, and not as instrumentally constructive or participatory acts (Sassi, 2000).

From the civic society and participation point of view, the main qualities of the Internet technology are the possibility to *connect stakeholders* and to create *an open public sphere for interaction and publishing views* (Sassi, 2000, p. 10). The character of connecting people makes it possible for activists to join forces and strengthen their activity, but it also means creating new connections between the citizens and the administration. These kinds of connections happen to some extent in formal administrative frames (e.g. as online services offered for residents), but beyond the frames, such as with citizens' initiatives, these connections are challenging. If we aim to encourage citizen participation, these connections between active citizen groups and administrative institutions should improve greatly.

Many already connected citizen groups and communities apply technology to support their activities and form online platforms. There are also many citizens who get connected online, and form online communities. They represent a *new kind of citizen participation*, which is a typical trend in the information society. With the help of Internet technology people form cultural, interest-based, political, ethical, professional and local online communities and become connected. They use mailing lists, web logs, online publishing systems, WikiWikiWeb-techniques or common www-publishing formats. Since the concept of online community is very different from the traditional community, the meaning of community in the information society needs redefining. Membership in an online community can be more easily rejected and changed, it is not necessarily connected to any physical place and its activities resemble those of tribes more than traditional communities. Citizens' online activism springs up usually from people's own ideas and innovations. Citizens are active in unconventional ways, not necessarily the ways administrators define and expect. The connected citizens usually join their forces to become more influential participants.

The Internet as a public sphere is comparable with the media, but is also an entirely new kind of forum for publicity. Besides offering top-down information flows, it enables citizens to produce public information. The idea of the public sphere of Jürgen Habermas, about citizens having public discussions and debates, and thus making social changes first inspired alternative media representatives and, later, those enthusiastic about the Internet. The promising idea of a public sphere has not been very successful in practice. For example, in the area of media production the trend has been the opposite; the big media companies are even more powerful, people are considered as a receiving public, and the alternative voices of small media producers are dying out. There are online forums on the Internet, which resemble the public sphere of Habermas, but they meet many challenges, such as becoming too elitist, narrow-minded, and lacking the participation

of different stakeholders and decision makers in their discussions. Thus they have not obtained many results (Slevin, 2000, p. 77; Heller, 2001).

An online public sphere (or several spheres) for public discussions and participatory decision making is ideal for the active citizen. 'The importance of online public spheres is their ability to bring up new ideas, politically essential questions, to start new discourses and to question symbolic hierarchies' [1] (Sassi, 2000, p. 7). However, since the most influential stakeholders of society, such as economic and administrative parties, do not consider the public sphere as an actual concept for social participation, the possibilities for its success are still limited (e.g. Heller, 2001). The websites of different activist groups could be called micro public spheres (which may compete). Many researchers agree that the online public sphere has become fragmented and hierarchical, even though it could be cooperative and equal.

The Internet as a place for citizen participation would require much more cooperation between different stakeholders, and new innovative solutions, which could offer more than repeated conventional ways of participation with new tools. The kind of innovations needed could be applications such as a system to follow up the preliminary processes of decision-making, a system for citizen initiatives or some new mobile applications for participation. The central issue is to get different interest groups to join creative cooperation: administrators, technical experts, developers, designers, business representatives and citizens.

'The key question for meaningful online participation, is to have local administration enter into (in a principle of public transparency) open interaction with the citizens'[2] (Ridell, 2002, p. 88). The other challenge is connected to citizens themselves. There seems to be the need for online participation and public spheres, but since there are no established practices for meaningful online social participation, it remains a secondary forum for active citizenship (Hokka et al, 2004).

The online networks themselves do not have any direct impact on citizens' activity in society. However, there seems to be a correlation between Internet use and increasing social awareness (Katz & Rice, 2002). By using the Internet, it is possible to strengthen the identity of competent citizens, and to try to make administration more transparent and enhance interaction that does not patronize the citizens. Online networks cannot do much to change power structures, but by strengthening the role of the active citizen they can help people to become more aware about their possibilities and more included in the information society.

Internet Empowering Communities

The nature of local communities in the information society has changed from their traditional concept of community to becoming more individualistic. Communities have not disappeared, as Robert Putnam argues, and become replaced by individuals bowling alone (Putnam, 2000). These new communities could be characterized as a) *having a common interest* and b) *being easily changeable*. People still want to belong to communities, but they can now choose the community quite freely according to their individual interests. Belonging to a community is not as much inherited and stable, and people join the communities they find closer to their interests and values. If a community is not satisfying any more, it can be rejected and changed easily. On the other hand, if a community meets the demands of a person, he/she is also more likely to work for the common goals. Claude Fischer adds c) *being voluntarily operated* to the characteristics of new communities. Since people do not commit to these communities, they can also break up at any time. Even though the nature of communities has changed from the traditional ones in many information societies, this transformation is different and not so clear in developing countries or rural areas where commitment to a community can be very strong.

Barry Wellman, who has been studying online communities closely, defines community as a network of social relationships, which offers sociability, support, information, and a feeling of belonging (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002, p. 228). Even though the meaning of physical place in communal activities has reduced (door-to-door relations), and people are bowling with friends from different social groups (person-to-person relations) or they are making friends in online communities (role-to-role relations), local neighbourhoods and their residents still matter. People want to live in comfortable neighbourhoods, where children can be sent to school safely and which

offer enough services and activities. It is still important to know neighbours who can be trusted. Thus we can say that a local neighbourhood is one important community among the others.

Local communities can utilize new information technology and the Internet by using it to improve their cooperative activities and strengthen their capabilities in the information society. This empowerment can happen when community members improve their skills and knowledge, learn to share information, create new and diverse information flows, and increase their interaction and ways of participation. The most significant changes have happened in poor and remote neighbourhood projects, where technology has supported community development efforts. In welfare regions, the changes are connected more to improvements in communication and resident participation.

Internet technology can empower a community by serving as:

1. *an informational resource*, which can be used and shared by community members;
2. *a noticeboard* for communal issues;
3. *a discussion forum*;
4. *a place for participation* while making communal decisions;
5. *a publishing forum* for different views.

The potential power of the Internet is above all in its social interaction. By increasing access to information and by improving interaction, the social capital of a community increases at both individual and community level. Since online networks connect people and their resources quite easily, the Internet works well as technology, which assists in creating social capital. A collective benefit follows usually from individual interests, even though a communal benefit can also be seen as an aim (Katz & Rice, 2002, p. 351).

The Internet supports traditional forms of social capital, such as social networks, access to information, communal activities and political participation. The power of the Internet environment is in its ability to gather collective informative capital, which everyone may use without reducing access to it for anyone. Empowerment and increase of social capital correlates with commitment to a community. A community can encourage an individual in an empowerment process, in which case an individual wants to commit himself/herself to a community and work towards its aims. Thus a community role is essential within a process of digital empowerment.

However, the existence of information technology is not enough for community empowerment, if it doesn't lead to any relevant activities. The main issue is not the use of technology, but *how it is used*. The social and sociocultural context is also one of the key variables which defines the best practices for information technology in a particular community.

Information technology has been used successfully especially in development projects with marginalized communities. Information technology can be utilized for community empowerment both in a) developing countries, which are usually far behind in information and communication technology (ICT) development and b) high tech countries, where digital divides exist between regions and social groups.

Information technology has been useful in developing countries, for example in empowering villages by opening access to important information and improving residents' trade of farm products. The technology has helped many villagers to become part of the global economy and its informational networks. However, we must be very cautious in approaches to bridging global divides, since transferring our technology and our working models may not serve sustainable development in a different sociocultural context. It is critically important to base the digital empowerment process on the particular sociocultural environment and let community members be the leading force of the process. Instead of transferring ready-made solutions and models, it is more empowering to create open interactive networks and innovation networks between communities. Thus communities are in a role of competent cooperators and are able to help themselves develop.

Some good examples worth mentioning which use new technology for empowering poor communities in high technology countries include: the Computer Clubhouse concept and Camfield Estates housing development project in the United States; and Learning Upper Karelia (Oppiva Vaara-Karjala) and Learning Regions (Oppivat Seutukunnat) in Finland. Computer Clubhouse is a large project by MIT Media Laboratory and Boston Museum of Science, which has

been working on it since 1993, and has become a worldwide concept to improve the competency of youth especially in poor neighbourhoods (http://www.computerclubhouse.org). The main idea of the Camfield Estates project (since 2000) was to develop a residential community by asset-mapping the local resources and creating a social network, which would make residents more aware and more participatory in their community (Pinkett, 2002). The Finnish projects were mainly aiming at including remote areas in the information society and making them more competent agents in the society's networks.

Considering the problems of digital divides, it is just as important to discuss the *content divides* as the *technical divides*. Most community development projects aim at improving technical access, but not participatory options. For as long as the contents are mostly produced by power elites of society, and do not meet the real needs of people in their cultural context, the technology serves the existing power structures and economic interests, and upholds the content divides.

When we aim at strengthening the agentive role of community, *community-oriented content production* can contribute to this kind of empowering development. Compared with top-down information production, community-oriented content production represents horizontal and a 'many-to-many' kind of information flow. A physical result of community's content production can be called *community media*, which could be a community magazine, radio channel or website. Compared to mass media, community media offers many interesting opportunities to improve interaction, participation and social activity.

Communities providing content for their own media is also called *citizen journalism*, which offers opportunities to share information, educate people, and encourage them to become active contributors. Local information sharing is essential for people to be aware of their surroundings and to become involved in discussions about local issues. Educational purpose is connected to learning technology, editing processes and expressing oneself by writing articles, which helps people to analyze their thoughts and form opinions. Becoming active contributors means both expressing opinions and working for the desired goals and improvements. Communities working closely together support their members in their efforts and as communities they become more powerful agents in society.

Some successful examples of online citizen journalism of communities are the *HarlemLive* project in New York's Harlem community (http://www.harlemlive.org) and the Mansetori project (http://www.mansetori.uta.fi) in Finland. *HarlemLive* is an online journal which provides youth with opportunities to learn new information technology and journalistic skills. Through editorial practices they also learn more about the aspects of life around them, and take responsibility of their own futures. The Mansetori concept offers publishing opportunities for neighbourhoods and citizen groups in Tampere city. The communities have created their own websites for sharing local information, for discussions and for providing stories about their neighbourhoods. The Mansetori initiative includes, for example, the gypsies' online community, which has opened up an entirely new channel for publishing cultural issues and for interaction between the gypsies and the main population.

The Internet as a publishing forum can very well serve communities in their attempts to become more competent participants in the information society. By encouraging communal activity, learning new skills, and sharing information openly, some community ICT projects have empowered people and made real changes in their neighbourhoods. Community-oriented content production is an essential part of these attempts, because it offers people new opportunities to express their views and opinions, it diversifies information flows, and it bridges content divides. In the cases, particularly, of poor neighbourhoods, minorities, and communities that are not part of mainstream western culture, it is crucial to make their views public and create interaction to support their development.

The Spiral of Digital Empowerment

Information technology can be applied to support individual and community empowerment, or to start an empowering process in a community. By using information technology we can increase the competence of communities to be involved meaningfully in the information society. This increase of competence can help in bridging poor and marginalized communities to enable them to

become part of the networks of communication and many kinds of welfare. I call this bridging *a process of digital empowerment*.

Digital empowerment is an *enabling process*, which proceeds like a spiral from the prerequisites to the improvements in skills and knowledge, and then to the consequences, which are empowering for the community and its members. The changes happening during this process are not just one-way improvements, but they reflect and influence each other's. The spiral of digital empowerment is dynamic and changing because it keeps up with progress in the surrounding society.

The launching force for an empowering process can be a community development project, an ICT programme, or even individuals working as animators. However, the continuation of the process depends mainly on the community itself. That is why the key question, already in the early stages of an empowering process, is to make it autonomous and independent from outside patronizing help. Thus the process has to happen horizontally and be community oriented.

The first phases of the spiralling process are connected to basic prerequisites. I identify four components as necessary for the empowerment process – namely, *awareness, motivation, technical access* and *competence*.

Awareness refers to understanding the potential opportunities of using any new technology, such as the Internet. If people don't know enough about the options or don't understand them, they do not see any reasons to apply and invest in the technology. Motivation also is an essential element in all kinds of learning and development. It is an individual factor, but the social environment has a significant impact on it. Social encouragement has motivational impact especially in the first phase of using new technology; after that, the usefulness becomes the first criterion (Kaivonen, 2002, p. 50). Both awareness and motivation are often more critical variables than technical access when making decisions to use or not to use the Internet (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2003). Awareness and motivation are critical psychological variables for all kinds of empowerment processes.

Technical access refers to both the hardware and software needed for accessing the Internet. Since the technology is unequally distributed, there are technical divides between people and regions. Only about 10 per cent of the global population is online, while in wealthier countries (e.g., USA, Finland) the rate is about 70 to 80 per cent. However, having technical access does not mean that the technology is being used if there is no need or desire for it. Competence refers to the skills and abilities to use new information technology, and to digital literacy to understand its messages. Digital literacy requires the ability to receive and use electronic information for one's purposes.

I would add a fifth component to the prerequisites of digital empowerment: *a possibility for constructive participation*. This is crucial because it refers to the abilities and possibilities to have an interactive role in the society and its networks. This element enables people to participate in applying any new technology, designing new tools and having a meaningful role in society's development.

The second phase or 'spin' of the spiralling process leads to some improvements both at the individual and the community level. Such improvements include being connected to widening social networks, technical skills, receiving and producing information, and learning new ways to act and participate by using information technology (Quan-Haase et al, 2002; Servon, 2002). The process is empowering and rewarding by itself; so it does not come to any particular end but, rather, is constantly evolving and demanding to be renewed. Improvements happen all the time during the process and every change is strengthening. There are some concrete changes during the process, such as:

1. Technical skills improvements – a community or an individual learns to use new technology and its applications;
2. Widening networks improvements – the networks of social interaction and participation grow, and a person or a community becomes more involved;
3. Improvements in receiving and producing information – access to information recourses gets better and a community or an individual is enabled to construct new information;
4. Improvements in learning new courses of action – a community or an individual applies new technology to support its/his/her activities.

These improvements can happen after having the components of prerequisites settled and making them serve the community's/an individual's aims. The improvements again lead to development connected to the community's/individual's readiness in the information society. This development can be described as a second phase in the spiralling process. The first phase enables the changes of the second phase. For example, the technical skills improvements (1) enable changes in competence and believing in one's capabilities (1.1.). A person develops his/her learning skills, and becomes aware of his/her talents and possibilities. Improvements in widening the networks (2) lead to changes in participation (2.1.). A person becomes competent in making changes in his/her environment by participating in social interaction and decision-making. Improvements in receiving and producing information (3) lead to changes in making choices and influence (3.1.). A person finds more options and alternatives, and he/she can also express new views. Improvements in learning new courses of action (4) are essential for a person's everyday life and social activities, and lead to chances to have control over things (4.1.). He/she becomes enabled to control situations in the prevailing context.

These two levels or phases are the first dynamic spins of the empowerment process. If we consider also more general and psychological changes, we could see a third phase forming from the first two. The changes in competence (1.1.) could lead to *changes in self-confidence* (1.2.). The changes in participation (2.1.) could lead to *changes in becoming more aware of one's social role and surroundings* (2.2.). The changes in making choices and influence (3) could lead to *changes in freedom* (3.2.), so that a person could think, choose and act more freely. And the changes in control over things and situations (4.1.) could lead to *changes in control over one's life* (4.2.).

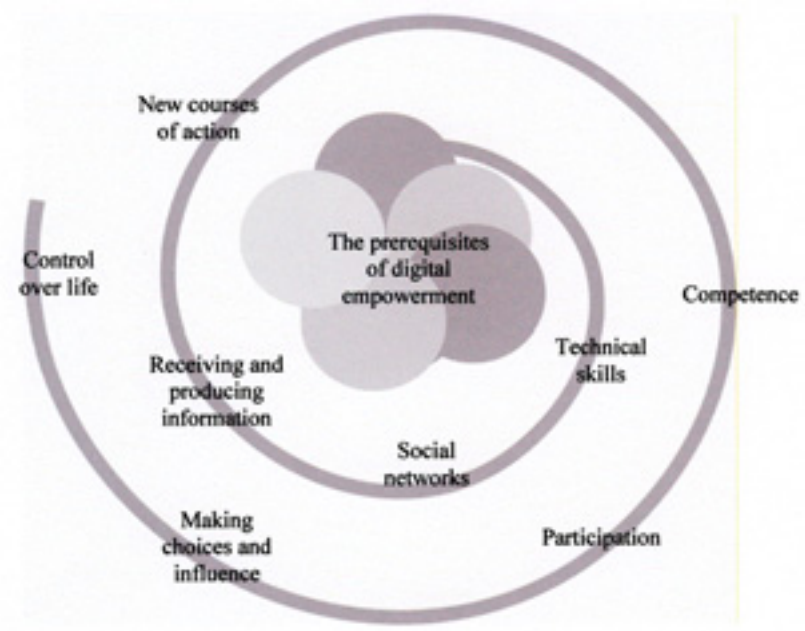

Figure 2. A process of digital empowerment begins from the prerequisites (in the middle), and grows as spiralling circles enabling improvements in skills and competence, and leading into consequences, which adds to the welfare of communities and individuals.

The first phase of the spiralling process with changes in skills and so forth is concrete and quite visible. The following levels are all the time a little further from the concrete changes, and the causes are more difficult to pin down. The further the effects are from the causes, and the centre of the spiral, the more difficult it becomes to explain the factors leading to them. The cohesion between the elements is there, but not as strongly as between the elements of the first two phases of the process. The further phases are more affected by other variables (e.g. some other elements increasing empowerment). For instance, if we launch an ICT project in a developing neighbourhood, where the economy is rising and people get employed more easily, the Internet

supports widening social networks and increases participation, but applying the use of new technology may not be the only reason for it. If a community is encouraging, it certainly supports the self-confidence of its members, besides improvements in technical competence. Thus we could conclude that new information technology can be used to start a spiralling empowerment process in a community, or to speed up a development process alongside the other factors.

Education is often used as an empowering force for developing communities. Empowering pedagogy especially tries to encourage actions and conditions, where a community and its members can grow into their potential. For enhancing digital empowerment in a community, we can apply an approach of sociocultural animation, which supports participatory activities and grassroots orientation in communities' development. The process of digital empowerment is always a learning process, where a community learns new courses of action and interaction. The learning happens in skills, knowledge, and practices.

The Digital Empowerment Spiral into Inclusion Practices

The process of digital empowerment contributes to the readiness needed in an information society, and it supports people acting as competent and autonomous members in their social context. The spiral tool could be applied in encouraging this development process, or as an approach to study the changes happening in ICT-based development projects.

The empowerment process can be used as an inclusive model to strengthen the possibilities to become an included and competent participant in society. *Being included* refers here to a feeling of belonging to a society and knowing that one can participate in the decision-making processes. Being included refers to feelings and experience, not necessarily to concrete action. A person who feels included knows how to participate, if he/she chooses to. Thus we should not presume that an included citizen always wants to participate and influence. The opposite situation for being included is being excluded. The excluded citizens are often called marginalized or dropouts.

The possibilities of participation and influence grow in an empowerment process with increasing inclusion. Participation refers here broadly to social activities with others. Civic participation refers usually to political or social activities with an aim to influence the common issues of the society. Both participation and having influence on social issues are forms of interaction, which increase during the spiral of empowerment, but participation is not the direct consequence of the empowerment. However, becoming more included describes more the outcomes of the process, which thus could also be called an inclusion process. When trying to enhance citizens' participatory roles in the information society it is vital to build this inclusive aspect into community development programs and ICT projects.

Investing in inclusive actions in communities – for example, encouraging community communication, promoting opportunities for open discussion and ways to have influence in communal decisions – can increase the feeling of belonging and being included in society. Therefore it seems quite odd when many researchers conclude that local ICT projects don't considerably strengthen the feeling of belonging in the community (Mäenpää, 2003, p. 95; Sassi, 2003, p. 38). The conclusions seem quite contradictory to observations, which describe how local ICT projects have increased positive attitudes towards the community, communal interaction and access to information (Mäkinen, 2000; Quan-Haase et al, 2002; Mäenpää, 2003).

I propose that inclusion projects or local development projects using new information technology could very well increase citizen participation and the feeling of being included in society. The Internet can enhance inclusion in information networks, in social interaction and in participatory activities. Some inclusion projects such as development programmes in poor neighbourhoods, rural areas, with unemployed people or with ethnic groups are good examples of trying to include people in society and its welfare. However, if the new inclusion practices, developed in these projects, do not get connected to the existing institutionalized systems, they stay marginal without making too much difference (Anttiroiko, 2003). The key issue, then, is to get all stakeholders involved in developing new participatory and inclusion practices.

The practices and attitudes should be developed more towards collective innovations rather than individualistic one-way consuming. The Internet is an excellent tool for common planning and problem solving because it is *free* and *open*. It is free for expression, for social interaction, for

accessing and producing information, and for anyone to use anywhere. The free and open online sphere serves well as a collective network, which connects different stakeholders complementing each other by their knowledge, views and resources. The more heterogeneous the network is, the more views, knowledge and resources it can combine, and the better prospects it has for new ideas and innovations.

The digital empowerment spiral could serve in practices to develop a poor or rural community, to create an innovation network for a community or in observing how ICT has worked for a community. In development and inclusion attempts, we should first look into prerequisites for digital empowerment, and see if any of the factors (awareness, motivation, technical access, competence, and constructive participation) are lacking. Then we could stimulate the first 'spin' of the process and look for improvements in skills, widening networks, interaction, receiving and producing information, and learning new courses of action. We could also look for improvements in participation, in exerting influence and in controlling one's own life instead of just receiving and consuming. The process is not only a consequence of using new technical tools, but an ongoing development circle, which supports other development efforts in a community by using ICT with a participatory community-oriented approach. In observing the success of an ICT project, we could first observe the changes that have happened in the project, and then go back around the spins studying the improvements, and see if there are gaps or obstacles in the prerequisites for launching the process.

The inclusion practices using the spiral tool could be such things as community online publishing projects, innovation networks with different stakeholders, public online spheres for citizen participation, or citizen journalism projects where anyone could take the role of information provider. Including people in applying new technology through community development efforts and in becoming meaningful actors in the information society are the key elements of these practices.

Notes

[1] Translation from the original text by M. Mäkinen.

[2] Translation by M. Mäkinen.

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