

# “Designing Balance into the Democratic Project: Contrasting Jeffersonian Democracy against Bentham's Panopticon Centralisation in determining ICT adoption”

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## SECTION 1 | **Macroeconomic Processes and Regional Economies Management**

### **Designing Balance into the Democratic Project: Contrasting Jeffersonian Democracy against Bentham's Panopticon Centralisation in determining ICT adoption**

Nada K. Kakabadse\*, Andrew Kakabadse\*\*, Alexander Kouzmin\*\*\*

#### **Abstract**

Positioned in a critical realist perspective, this paper examines the impact of systematic and institutional distortion to communication and the use of information and communicative technology (ICT) for control over citizen participation within the Liberal-democratic process. The paper contrasts the Jeffersonian vision of democracy against Bentham's Panopticon dystopia and reviews comparative models of democratic processes. In so doing, it is argued that the role of ICT, the role of pressure groups and concentrated media ownership and control pose significant issues for E-democracy, in particular that of less unfettered communication within the context of Liberal democracy. It is concluded that a new constitutional organ is required to enhance genuine participation within the Panopticon proclivities emergent in E-democracy.

**Key words:** Citizen; Communication; Democracy; E-democracy; Governance; Information; Jeffersonian Vision; Lobby Groups; Bentham's Panopticon; Public Policy.

**JEL classification:** E61.

#### **Introduction**

At the simplest level, democratic governance refers to the act of governing within a 'democratic' framework. This definition, however, neglects the complexity of arrangements that enable the process of democratic involvement to take place. The challenge arises from the diverse, and often conflicting, interests of the various stakeholders involved, in particular, three broad groups; citizens (in the economic literature referred to as households or consumers), firms and government (Hertz, 2003). Dominant economic and motivational theories assume that each stakeholder group holds different core motivations. It is assumed that citizens (or households) are motivated to maximise their satisfaction, firms to maximise profits and government to maximise the national welfare (Berle and Means, 1991). The reality is that whether these assumptions are correct or not, increased individualism, voter dissatisfaction with 'democratic' processes, growing divergence of belief concerning citizen welfare and a rapid proliferation of ICT, have provided fertile ground for debate concerning the relationship of the individual with the state (Held, 1989; Gutstein, 1999).

Many scholars have argued that the ability of individuals in developed society to uphold communicative competence is the apex of the historical development of mankind (Etzioni, 1971; 1995; Habermas, 1979; 1987). Communication infrastructure that supports democratic dialogue and accommodates the views and behaviours of citizens underpins the life of a democratic system (Fraser, 1993). This communicative capability, for example, was attained by the citizens of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC Athenian city-state, who participated actively in the public sphere. In 1951, McKeon reported

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that “acceptance of democracy as the highest form of political or social organisation is a sign of a basic agreement in the ultimate aims of modern social and political institutions – an agreement that the participation of people and the interests of the people are essential elements in government and in the social relations which make good government possible” (McKeon, 1951: 323).

On the basis that “democracy is a communicative-intensive mode of government” and that any technology that changes communication has the potential to change the practice of democracy (Klein, 1995; Korac-Kakabadse and Korac-Kakabadse, 1999; Kakabadse *et al.*, 2003), then the Habermasian (1996a; 1996b) argument that participants adopt communicative action (reaching understanding) rather than strategic action (attaining success for self) or symbolic action (where validity claims are suspended), prevails. The tetrachotomy of communicative validity, namely truth, rightness, sincerity and legitimacy claims (Habermas, 1979) are fundamental to discourse and understanding as their application facilitates critique. Proposals put forward can be tested and in so doing, participants can jointly discover meaning as a result of the communicative process itself (Calhoun, 1993: 13).

As such, Forester (1989) suggests that Habermas' (1987) notion of communicative rationality reveals the communicative distortions that “threaten to undermine common sense” – such as exposing ‘ideologies’ to the standards of ‘rational’ discourse, provide a means of reducing their influence in decision-making. In his analysis of the relation between law and power, Habermas (1996b: xxviii) holds that such interrelationship will not bear fruit unless it is connected to an account of public reason which “must ultimately refer to the democratic process of ‘opinion and will formation’ in the public sphere”. For Habermas (1996b: xxviii), the formation of opinion and will in public discourse is not “merely a cognitive exercise but mobilises reasons and arguments that draw on citizen’s actual source of motivation and volition”. Thus, generated is a “communicative power that has real impact on formal decision-making and action and represents the final institutional expression of political will” (Habermas, 1996b: xxviii). Informal public opinion-formation is transformed into ‘communicative power’ through political elections which, in turn, are transformed into ‘administrative power’ through legislation (Habermas, 1996b). The process is designed as circular so that connections are made between “the informal discursive sources of democracy with the formal decision-making institutions” (Habermas, 1996b: 169). In addition to defining the public sphere, Habermas' (1996a) communication theory helps explain how the ‘political economy’ of the media, namely the relationship between individual subjectivity and mediated construction of reality, is influenced by the character of specific media technologies such as cable television, interactive multimedia, the use of databases and the tension between information as a public good and information as a commodity (Zakaria, 2003; West, 2004).

Such consideration is of increased importance as current political developments are inherently founded on technological developments which can engender uncertainty on a worldwide scale or even “manufactured uncertainty” (Beck, 1992) where, for example, an “action at a distance”, whether related to interest rates or nuclear safety, may have dramatic and rapid effects on the global economy (Giddens, 1994). At the same time, there is a rise in expectations that people will make informed decisions for themselves and their communities on a range of social, work and home-related issues which, in turn, require provision of a more participative democracy (Lindblom, 1990; Mathews, 1994). Yet societies as those of the USA and the UK that operate mission-oriented public policies based on “big science deployed to meet big problems” (Weinberg, 1967: 24), technology is used strategically and is “intimately linked to objectives of national sovereignty” (national defence and national pride) such as atomic energy, atomic weapons and aeronautics but with the technology application debate removed from the public sphere (Ergas, 1987: 193). In societies with diffusion-oriented public policies, such as Sweden and Switzerland, decision-making is decentralised and citizens are involved in the public debate over the introduction of new technology (Ergas, 1987). Switzerland, Sweden and Denmark employ a number of deliberative techniques such as providing comprehensive background information to complex technological policy development for non-expert citizens to consider (Fay, 1987; Callinicos, 2000).

In an increasingly interconnected and high-risk world, mediated by information and communication technology (ICT), the need for dialogue orientated towards reaching understanding between government and the governed is of heightened importance (Bellamy, 2000; Greenberg, 2004). Considering that ICT design, use and structure are not neutral but enabling and/or controlling (Kapoor, 1991), this paper examines the quality of communication between government and the governed in an information age where ICT is used to realise the idea of a more participatory form of democracy, called 'direct democracy' by its promoters, 'plebiscitary democracy' by its critics and 'deliberative democracy' or 'discursive democracy' by scholars (Habermas, 1996b; Bohman and Rehg, 1997). Deliberative democracy, in particular, aims to introduce a new voice into policy design – the voice of the well-informed and, even at times, disinterested citizen (Adams, 2004) – which through collective decision-making clarifies the nature and value of collective goods as well as highlights the potential impacts of alternative policies (Bohman and Rehg, 1997; Bohman, 1998: 404).

Recognising that deliberative democracy encourages citizens to think differently about problems, conflicts and institutions across the wider public sphere (Bohman, 1998), this paper is positioned within a critical-realist perspective and aims towards nurturing greater understanding of the new kinds of social realities and uncertainties that result from human choices and developments in a highly-interconnected and ICT-mediated world (Morrison *et al.*, 1999).

A critical-realist perspective provides a provocative, political and morally-illuminating structural phenomenology for examining the nature and consequences of the use of ICT (Bhaskar, 1986). As Dahl (1989: 339) has noted, new technology may be used in ways harmful to democracy "without a conscious effort" to use new communication technology "on behalf of democracy". Recognising the criticality of the relationships between communication and democracy and the multitude of ICT adoption, this paper explores democracy from two contrasting visions, first the 'Jeffersonian vision' that has inspired contemporary academics and politicians to prise open the reputed democratic potential of the alleged 'communications revolution', expressed as a strong belief in the power of public opinion or what Agre (2002) terms "technology amplification theory", namely the ability to amplify citizen democratic participation by providing electronic public forums and electronic voting. The contrast is that of Bentham's (1995) 'Panopticon vision', which Agre (2002) terms "technology reinforcement theory" and Fountain (2004) positions as "technology enactment theory", which hold that ICT provides mechanisms to further reinforce existing power structures and social control as much through increasing surveillance. In the text, it is highlighted that although both amplification and reinforcement theories provide different analytical formworks, they often come to the same conclusion, namely that ICT does not create a new political order (Agre, 2002). Electronically-mediated political activities are embedded in broader social processes with ICT itself being only one element of the ecology of communication media and socio-political life (van Dijk, 2001). As such, ICT is considered a tool of 'reinforcement politics' and is less applicable for the "creation of new forms of democratic public spheres than to the support of already existing ones" (Buchstein, 1997: 260). Emerging from such analysis is a framework for a new democratic project based on a Jeffersonian vision (Jefferson, 1984). The paper concludes that, within current technology, both the visions of Jefferson and Bentham are achievable as much arising from the implicit or deliberative choices of elites (Foucault, 1970; Kaysen, 1996; Huber, 2003). On the basis that the shape and nature of democracy are ever evolving, this paper proposes a new democratic organ constitutionalising that the voice of the well-informed citizen is distinctly heard.

### **Jefferson, Democratic Values and ICT**

Human rights, a crucial link between democratic governance and quality of opportunity, has acted as the platform to the rights-based-approach to democracy which, in turn, has been inspired by a history of social movements – in recent history, notably women's rights, the landless and indigenous people movements. The right to participate in political processes – voice – represents a claim for an entry point to other rights such as the right for development, healthy environment, peace and security (Johnson, 2000). In western societies, human rights emphasise universal rights rather than

local rights and individual autonomy rather than community membership and communal responsibility (Hume, 1985).

The very idea of rights, conceived in the 450 BC Athenian city-state, is now embedded in Article One of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (UNDPI, 1998). The Athenian interpretation of democratic governance and rights was that of direct democracy (government by the people) supported by four distinct organs of governance; legislative (*Ekklesia*), executive (*Boulé*), administrative (*Magistracies*), and judiciary (*Dikasteries*) (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2003). The Roman republic provided a contrast whereby the citizen was not an active and involved member of the political community but rather a passive recipient of specific rights and entitlements (Walzer, 1989: 215). Although Rome’s republic (*Respublica*) was governed constitutionally through a mixed separation of powers amongst groups of leading political figures and their followers (*Optimates*, *Populares*), through three distinct organs – the supernumerary organ – the *Senatus Consultum* (consultative), organ of two assemblies, *Comitia Centuriate* and *Comitia Tributa* and the ‘anti-organ’ of two assemblies, *Tribunals* and *Concilium Plebus* (Finer, 1999), in reality it was ruled by an oligarchy of aristocratic families who had membership to governing bodies depending on a propriety qualification.

The Jeffersonian vision of democracy followed the Athenian interpretation of active citizen involvement. Thomas Jefferson strongly believed in the power of public opinion and the democratic deliberation of the local community (Aiken, 1997). His vision was of a congress of self-governing agricultural communities coming together over a vast territory to form a vibrant nation-state of popular sovereignty (Aiken, 1997). Jefferson (1984: 493) wrote, “I know of no safe depository of the ultimate power of the society but the people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion”. Jefferson’s (1984) concern for a well-informed populace being the basis for a stable self-governing community drove his desire for an extensive programme of public works designed to bring the nation together, such as the promotion of public education and the construction of roads and canals. Jefferson (1984: 529) believed that, “new channels of communication will be opened between the states, the lines of separation will disappear; their interests will be identified and their union cemented by new and indestructible ties”.

The Jeffersonian vision continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the emergence of the socially-conscious ‘Chicago School’ of social commentators and the establishment of the telegraph and railroad as the new channels of communication creating a unified nation and a unified culture, “a great public of common understanding and knowledge” (Carey, 1989: 143). The Jeffersonian perspective concerning communication was more than that of simple information circulation, as it has been described as an “encephalated social nervous system with the control mechanism of communication divorced from the physical movement of people and things” (Carey, 1989: 143), namely a concept of the public sphere which allows rational-critical debate and action to take place (Thompson, 1990). The policy of improving communication over long distances as a form of integrative power continues today with television programming, movies, print media and the spread of the Internet (Carey, 1989).

Especially with the growing advances in ICT proliferation and uptake, some have argued that a new ICT has the capacity to involve its users in social actions in both material and discursive ways (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2003). Materially, ICT provides the potential for a wide range of data collection, storage, manipulation and analysis whilst, at the same time, offering information on demand, increasing in shared knowledge and enabling real-time structured learning events to transcend boundaries of time and space – thus becoming a tool for building solutions (McAteer, 1994: 68). The new interactive communication media, such as Internet and/or satellite-based two-way communication, and the speed of communication facilitating a more predicative citizen involvement in the public sphere, has sparked interest in Jeffersonian ideas by technology savvy citizens, academics and political actors (*The Economist*, 2003).

New ICT is being viewed as a means for the fulfilment of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘bourgeois public sphere’ (i.e. ‘club and coffee-house’) functions where individuals were able to exchange views through ‘reasoned argument’. In 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century coffee-house convention, everyone had an equal right to speak (Habermas, 1987: 33). In Germany, for example, the societies that formed the public sphere were open, not only to the nobility but allowed for “an equality and association among persons of unequal social status” (Habermas, 1987: 35). Even in England, the coffee-house embraced not only the nobility but “the wider strata of the middle class including craftsmen and shopkeepers” (Habermas, 1987: 33). Similarly in France, where the aristocracy increased their emphasis on hierarchy in social intercourse, they mingled with the bourgeoisie in the salons where “opinion became emancipated from the bonds of economic dependence” (Habermas, 1987: 33). Interactive debate facilitated by ICT between citizens and their representatives offers, first, the representatives a rapid impression of citizen opinions on practical issues with both richness and scope (providing links for politician to groups with whom they have had no previous contact) and second, creates an opportunity for increasing citizen participation. Klein (1995: 88), for example, postulated that the increased flows of communication, sustained by ICT, would promote ‘ideal speech’ (non-power related) and ‘help to overcome communicative distortions’ (distortion due to intermediaries’ re-interpreting original information). The ICT connectivity capability to promote hope of a Jeffersonian vision of informed citizens, well able to utilise their discretion, was endorsed by Ross Perot in his 1992 presidential campaign popularising the concept of an “electronic town hall” (Aiken, 1997; Kakabadse *et al.*, 2003). Later Al Gore (1995: 1), the US Vice-President wrote, “we would like to see a National Information Infrastructure that allows individuals to be producers as well as consumers of information, that enables ‘many to many communication’ and that provides a ‘general purpose’ infrastructure capable of supporting a wide range of services”. Gore (1995: 1) explicitly stated that government is “interested in working co-operatively with industry and academia to promote a shared vision of a versatile, general purpose infrastructure with a ‘Jeffersonian’ architecture”. During 1995, a new computerised Congressional information service was named Thomas, in honour of Jefferson’s vision, assumed to promote a political stability as new ICT was being incorporated into the ever evolving political, social and economic institutions, better meeting the needs of citizens. Not that the relationship between technology and the betterment of the citizen experience is new, for the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, comparable comment and initiative were evident. Dewey (1989: 184), as Jefferson, stated that “when the machine age has perfected its machinery, it will be a means of life and not its despotic master. Democracy will come into its own, for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communication”. Dewey (1989) viewed community as a collective of kinship, labour and friendship networks which share a common geographic territory, a common history and a shared value system in which democratic processes are critical to protect in order for democracy to survive.

In effect, new ICT is seen as an enhancer of communication facilitating the realisation of large-scale citizen participation as governments address the needs of community through sophisticated network-based ICT applications or “digital government” Grossman (1995: 48). The advent of “digital government” unveils new opportunities for government to address citizens’ needs and requirements in innovative ways, such as greater and more active citizen participation, in effect democracy, e-volunteerism, greater e-voting and public e-referenda (Kraemer and King, 1986). The interpretation of Jeffersonian democratic free will as applied to the information revolution is that of an inherently democratic ‘disruptive technology’ which will dramatically change politics for the better (Singh, 2002; Clift, 2003). The advancement and uptake of new ICT have promoted new hopes for democracy associated with ideas related to direct democracy, in which it has been hoped that the representative system would be replaced by the direct rule of the people (Korac-Kakabadse and Korac-Kakabadse, 1999; Heeks, 2001; Norris, 2001; Kakabadse *et al.*, 2003). The vision is of a new ICT that will improve relationships between government operations and the provision of public services and which will allow more direct participation by the ordinary citizen in decision-making (Heeks, 2001; Kakabadse *et al.*, 2003). This expectation is also reflected in the OECD (2001: 71) report entitled *Citizens as Partners* which concludes that governments are:

*“under pressure to adopt a new approach to policymaking – one which places greater emphasis on citizen involvement both upstream and downstream to decision-making. It requires governments to provide ample opportunity for information, consultation and participation by citizens in developing policy options prior to decision-making and to give reasons for their policy choices once a decision has been taken.”*

### **ICT Shadow Side: Bentham’s Panopticon Future**

Juxtaposed to the Jeffersonian vision of communicative freedom is that of experience to date which has been one of utilising new technologies and online communication strategies for the protection of vested interests (Clift, 2003) and also that of extending control over people thus, redefining the meaning and the nature of democracy and citizenship (Gandy, 1993; Dalyell, 2004). It is postulated that new ICT does not create a political order of enhanced consciousness but more that electronically-mediated political activities are embedded in broader social processes (Gutstein, 1999). New technology is employed to “reproduce and strengthen, institutionalised socio-structural mechanisms even when such enactment leads to seemingly irrational and obsessively sub-optimal use of technology” (Fountain, 2004: 5).

The Jeffersonian ideal of popular sovereignty has been subsumed by the arguments of David Hume, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, namely that of the ‘extended republic’, providing a socio-structural platform of political election of professional representations identified through a college system of candidate selection (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2006). Despite the first amendment to the Bill of Rights, guaranteeing freedom of speech and peaceable assembly, the participation of the general citizens in public opinion formation was subsumed by the political representative to both represent and mould citizen views (Habermas, 1996a; Aiken, 1997). Dependency on the political representative and the apparent inability of institutional structures to allow citizens to be informed and determine their policy option have allowed powerful interest groups to exercise undue power, subvert democratic processes and allow the use of new ICT to be an effective mechanism of social control thus, reinforcing existing power structures. The ICT reinforcement model is captured in the ‘Panopticon’ blueprint first envisaged by the British 18<sup>th</sup> century utilitarian philosopher and theorist, Jeremy Bentham (1995), in his examination of social control in prisons, asylums, workplaces and schools.

According to Bentham (1995), the Panopticon (or ‘all-seeing’) was designed as a round-the-clock surveillance mechanism which ensured that no prisoner could view the ‘inspector’ who conducted surveillance from a privileged central location within a radial configuration. Prisoners would never know when they were being surveilled, thus nurturing uncertainty which, in itself, would provide for a crucial instrument of discipline (Foucault, 1991).

Research on the delivery of services through electronic means shows that once an ICT perspective is adopted, service delivery is constrained by the organisational force within which it is enmeshed (Taylor *et al.*, 1995; Fountain, 2004). In the UK, for example, welfare payments are made within the product-led setting which shapes, models and restrains specific innovations, thereby raising questions about whether there are the providers rather than the consumers who continue to be the ultimate beneficiaries of electronic innovations (Taylor *et al.*, 1995). In similar vein, certain studies suggest that ICT-mediated democratic relationships are not challenging the fundamental ordering of democratic processes but, rather, traditional bureaucracies are being replaced by ‘infocracies’ (van de Donk and Tops, 1992; Taylor *et al.*, 1995; Snellen, 2002). Others argue that ICT now pervades all sectors of society which, in turn, increases control through electronic surveillance or ‘keeping watch over’ communication (e-mails, mobile phones) in the workplace as well as in the public sphere (CCTV) through systematic monitoring, observation, collection and analysis of information on people in order to ultimately exert control (Lyon and Zureik, 1996; Korac-Kakabadse *et al.*, 2000).

In the UK, for example, the wiring up of public space with sophisticated surveillance systems has been rapid. In a short space of time, CCTV systems have been installed in city centres, schools,

hospitals, libraries, car parks and roads, as well as in residential and rural areas (Home Office, 1997). Britons are watched by more CCTV cameras than anywhere else (the average Briton is caught on camera 300 times a day) as 10 per cent of the world's 30 million CCTV cameras are located in Britain (*The Week*, 2004a). Moreover, the British government's choice for satellite-based vehicle tracking systems for road-charging purposes is to provide police and other governing bodies with the speed and direction of the vehicle and the identification of the driver, which, in turn, is seen as even greater intrusion into civil liberties as the surveillance of a mainly law-abiding public is taken to new levels (*The Economist*, 2005a).

Further, ICT surveillance is increasingly being used in the workplace, offices, warehouses and distribution centres where employees' activities and levels of efficiency are monitored (Buckley, 2005). The alleged sustained bugging of various private and business conversations of the United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan and other UN representatives, in the run-up to the war on Iraq, by British and US intelligence officers, is one example of current practice (Reiss, 2004; *The Economist*, 2004b; Waugh and Sengupta, 2004). Thus, examination of 'tele-democracy' application has raised concerns as to whether such activities are more likely to lead to an 'Orwellian nightmare' of an elites determined social contract rather than to an Athenian-style democracy (van de Donk and Tops, 1992).

Concerns over centralist controls are further heightened through the genetic material of British citizens being captured in the world's largest DNA database, whilst the government simultaneously builds even larger databases containing information about people's tax payments, employment status, educational records, benefit payments, health records, criminal activities and family relationships (*The Economist*, 2004a). The MORI poll, "Your Government", shows that two-thirds of Britons do not trust their government to keep information from others whilst 50 per cent suspect that government abuse of information will cause a rash of forgeries (*The Economist*, 2004a). Similar results are revealed through The Edelman Annual Trust Barometer (2005) indicating that only 44.0 per cent of Americans trust their government whilst 32.0 percent trust what they read in national newspapers. It is ironic that, while citizens increasingly demand greater democratic governance, studies have shown that citizen participation in civic and political activities have been on the decline (Lyons and Alexander, 2000; Putnam, 2001).

From space satellites, such as the Global Positioning System to the Internet, mobile telephone, public CCTV and office and home electronic gadgetry, every minutiae of human activity is monitored and its data collected. ICT is particularly effective because it is "reflexive" (Whitaker, 2000) – that is, management monitors workers as well as itself which, in turn, creates and re-creates new structures and new futures (Whitaker, 2000). These newly emerging structures, although variously named as "Virtual Feudalism" (Mowshowitz, 1997), "Post-national State" (Whitaker, 2000), "New Serfdoms", "IT-Harems" and "Electronic Shoguns" (Korac-Kakabadse *et al.*, 2000), all depict increasingly invisible, all-seeing, all powerful, control mechanisms over citizens. Bentham's (1995) 'Panopticon' has been used both by novelists (Zamyatin, 1921/1924; Orwell, 1949) and scholars (Mowshowitz, 1997; Whitaker, 2000; Korac-Kakabadse *et al.*, 2000; van de Donk and Tops, 1992) as a metaphor to raise awareness of increased use/abuse of ICT in the collection of citizen's information through overt and covert surveillance mechanisms for purposes of inducing social control as well as for trading and/or creating criteria for predicating and controlling the behaviour of particular individuals or segments of society.

Notwithstanding, the level of reality or remoteness of the "panopticon vision of totalitarian, electronic control, the metaphor is very compelling because it represents the architecture of modern power" (Whitaker, 2000: 28). In the information age, the global political economy and its major tenants, corporate business and their lobby groups, exert an unprecedented power over the declining sovereignty of the state to produce 'business-friendly policies' which, in turn, leads to (Mowshowitz, 1997; Korac-Kakabadse *et al.*, 2000):

- ◆ A focus on micro-economic rationality (profit-maximisation, pursuit of immediate economic self-interest) to the exclusion of macro-social realities.



- ◆ A retreat of the state (through privatisation, out-sourcing, hollowing out) and the increased delivery of public services by private parties which exercise authority in their own name, rather than in the name of law that transcends their own power (BBC News, 2005).
- ◆ A blurring of lines between the public and private sectors due to the lack of visible governance mechanism to ensure for the protection of the public sphere.
- ◆ A rise of private centres of economic power, which gradually assume political power unchecked by regulation (political power divided amongst profit-seeking private parties) which, in turn, hastens the decline of state resources and the erosion of state power (currency, tax, tariffs).
- ◆ Growing disparities between wealth and poverty, both between and within regions and communities (fortressed, affluent suburbia and desolated quarters).
- ◆ Transformation of work practices through technology and the growing underclass of unemployed, unemployable and part-timers working to live on the poverty line.
- ◆ The re-location of risk (manufacturing and environmental risk to the Third World).
- ◆ Growth of private security, “private justice” and “Gulags of our times” (incarcerated and/or persons that are politically marginalised and invisible; Thorne and Kouzmin, 2004; Amnesty International, 2005).

Increasingly, business-friendly policies have led to corporate control over impoverished governments and a bifurcation of ‘citizens’ into ‘clients’ or ‘customers’ (Pierre, 1993; Monbiot, 2001). Private interests are increasingly colonising institutions in and around government through a ‘new patronage’ system of contracts, grants, tax benefits and programmes that employ or finance business allies (Crenson and Ginsberg, 2002). The preferences of the privileged become served through market mechanisms whilst the disaggregated public are turned into private customers whose personal needs seldom grow into collective demands (Crenson and Ginsberg, 2002).

Citizens’ rights have been increasingly diverted from the public sphere to the economic sphere, where the limitations of consumer choice over the public good prevail for the majority of citizens and where dormant ideologies maintain their hegemony despite the fact that they would not be legitimated if subjected to political discourse (Schroyer, 1971; Forester, 1989: 224). These ideologies are used to remove whole aggregates of social norms from public questioning and, thus, the non-democratic reproduction of social relations appears as blocked access to those theoretical and practical discourses within which the claims of citizens could, most freely, be debated (Schroyer, 1971; Forester, 1989: 224; Alterman, 2003).

The outcome is a context in which citizens have no recourse to such discourses dominating their lives and are subject to domination and the less than legitimate exercise of power (Forester, 1989: 224; Crenson and Ginsberg, 2002). In response, Forester (1989) argues that there is a need for a systematic assessment of communications effects and distortions in democratic participation.

## **Democratic Processes and ICT**

It is apparent that representative democracy, whether the trustee model of the UK or the binding representative model of the US, is particularly vulnerable to the influence of organised, often financially endowed, representing interests (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2006). The trustee model is vulnerable to the influence of party supporters and enforced party lines, whilst the binding representative model is vulnerable to the influence of supporting interests and the lobby of supporting interest groups (Woolf, 2005). The influence of large corporate interests and lobby groups is of particular concern, as is their ability to control and supervise expressions of public opinion (CRP, 2004). Madison (1953: 47) wrote in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, “Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech, or have the press or the right of the people to peaceably assemble”. However, it is strongly asserted that citizens’ rights are being continuously eroded undermining democracy as the system of governance (Korac-Kakabadse *et al.*, 2000; Crenson and Ginsberg, 2002). Habermas (1976) further argues that the ‘colonisation’ of the ‘life-world’ or the public sphere, takes place when

the influential media begin to penetrate the reproduction processes of the world; that is, when the communicative infrastructure of society, constituted by understanding-oriented communicative action, is displaced by strategic action of communication that is co-ordinated by money and power requiring only an 'objectivity attitude' and an orientation to success that undermines democratic principles and the core of society (Habermas, 1976; White, 1988: 110).

Democratic governance requires appropriate balance such that no-one group holds a disproportionate share of resources or access to resources. One example of goods and services that all citizens should have equal access to is free information. The Internet provides an ideal forum for public interrelations. Many thousands of companies have already provided web sites that are not intended to generate profit but are intended to generate brand loyalty, positive image and to collect demographic and other information about the customer. As the user gathers information about the product, the company gathers data about its customers (e.g. credit cards, Internet searches, emails, government databases etc.), greatly enhancing its ability to create public acceptance and to influence buying behaviour (Stallabrass, 1995: 20). In effect, the co-operative ideology of ICT originators is clashing with capitalism. Although the Internet has the potential to challenge the existing media monopoly and combat its commodification effects, there are, however, several powerful factors opposing this potential, namely (Curran, 1996: 92):

- ◆ media concentration in the hands of the few;
- ◆ advertising pressures;
- ◆ unequal division of power and resources (information-intensive markets have a winner-takes-all characteristic and almost impossible to dislodge);
- ◆ restrictions on market entry; and
- ◆ professional routines and values.

Currently, decision-making in dominant public spheres, including the Internet, tends to advantage the dominant groups by defining what is important and by setting out expressive norms and modes of discourse. For example, the private sector manages the ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) domain-name systems with hardly any public discussion of the '.xxx' web suffix for sites with pornographic content which not only creates virtual 'red light-districts' on the web that leads to web zoning, but also imposes a universal value on what is adult material irrelevant of cultural sensitivities (*The Economist*, 2005b). The emerging trend is of users reframing their identities from citizens and/or 'netizens' (Internet users) to e-consumers. Publicity, rather than discourse, is becoming the more prevalent mode of ICT mediated communication, as the 'public' tends more and more to slide into 'publicity' and 'character' is replaced by 'image' (Poster, 1990: 3).

Questions are framed in relation to prevailing political structures. Deflections are applied which exclude the question of the subject or identity construction from the domain of discussion. One critical deflection is the use of ICT as a political instrument favouring certain groupings. For example, ICT is increasingly used to tighten the centrality of control of the policy design of the public sphere, rationalise policy decision-making through the use of 'objective information' and replace bureaucracy with 'infocracy' (van de Donk, 1998; Zuurmond, 1998).

Using ICT enables political decision-making to opt for a technocratic style of decision-making which encourages a certain degree of de-politicisation in resource allocation and the introduction of complex policy but with minimum handling of unwanted outcomes and risk to policy acceptance (van de Donk, 1998) – an electronic 'conveyer belt' approach to policy design (Zuurmond, 1998). A conveyer belt approach is based on increased standardisation that flows according to strict standard operating procedures for information gathering, storing, checking activities, time of access, decision-algorithms embedded into software and electronic expert systems that control and guide communication structure, co-ordination and authorisation (Zuurmond, 1998).

However, although system users (politicians, civil servants) become as knowledgeable as the experts that provide the content of the expert system, the information they act upon, the 'objective information', is based on pre-defined parameters of expert databases which leads to undervaluing

the users' own, 'softer', information (Zuurmond, 1998). This, in turn, influences what governing elites see as 'reality' and consequently this influences their behaviour which makes governance processes increasing 'rational' and 'objective' but less humane. Moreover, the underlying theoretical constructs and values of software system parameters influence the manner in which the engineering design of a given ICT is imbedded from within the system (Orlikowski, 1992). Dewey's (1989: 120) observation that there are citizens who have an opportunity to vote for a "ticket of men mostly unknown to them and which is made up for them by an under-cover machine, in a caucus, whose operation constitutes a kind of political pre-destination", increasingly resonates in an information age.

Ever more voting processes are being conducted using electronic voting means, such as touch screens, without supporting physical evidence (Redman, 2003). This electronic democratic model bases its support on the premise that, given the opportunity to be involved, citizens respond in a positive manner and play a full role in the electoral process – casting his/her vote accordingly. Such pursuit, in turn, presumes that voters are well informed about politics, especially about the issues, and are able to evaluate viable alternatives and arrive at a rational decision. However, the new form of ICT-mediated democracy offers greater centralisation of control, exemplified by overt and covert information collection on each citizen through a variety of electronic agents than was the experience of previous communication media (Zuurmond, 1998).

Aside from 'positioning agendas', ICT can also undermine democratic processes as experienced in Florida during the US 2000 Presidential election. Reporting on the study by the US Commission on Civil Rights, Pierre and Slevin (2001) write that the election was marked by "injustice, ineptitude and inefficiency" that unfairly penalised minority voters. The 167 page final draft report reveals that over-zealous efforts to purge state voter lists was a factor in the widespread disenfranchisement of largely non-white voters (Pierre and Slevin, 2001). The Editor of the open editorial column of *The New York Times*, Paul Krugman, argued that "electronic voting poses a threat to the republic" as computer experts have pointed that security flaws in software at Diebold, and other manufacturers of electronic voting machines, can easily allow insiders to rig an election (Krugman, 2004: 23). The two Bills introduced to Congress, seeking to amend the *Help America Vote Act, 2002* so that voter-verification, in the form of a permanent record, is available (each touch-screen voting machine would produce a paper record), cannot prevent other electronic security weaknesses (Redman, 2003; Krugman, 2004). Even in the world's most populous democracy, India, steps have been taken to preserve data security and transparency of voting machines. First, data can be printed only by court order and second, instead of voting machines being linked to other computers though the network, thus increasing exposure to threat, the machines are autonomous devices with software embedded in micro-processors that cannot be programmed and, as such, provide no leverage for hackers or manipulators (Kripalani, 2004). However, even the transparency of the electronic voting system can work to its disadvantage as was the case in Gujarat local elections in December 2002. As machines show exactly how each community (village, district) voted, men armed with sticks went into the small town of Gujarat and attacked residents for voting against their candidate (Kripalani, 2004).

Dismay over ICT applications within democratic structures is one part of a concern of ownership, control and subsequent use and abuse of communication channels for political ends (Habermas, 1987). The other, is that identified by Rheingold (1993: 14) who argues that the concentration of media ownership poses a serious threat to democracy, commenting that "a world in which a few people control communications, technology can be used to manipulate the beliefs of billions", an experience more akin to totalitarian rule. Studies in the social sciences confirm such comment, illustrating the importance of the role of the media in shaping perceptions of social reality (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1948; McLuhan and Fiore, 1969; Chen and Meindl, 1991; Lippmann, 1991; Gerbner *et al.*, 1996; Gerbner, 1997; Crenson and Ginsberg, 2002) as well as how political and economic forces shape media discourse (Foucault, 1980; Chomsky, 1989; Alterman, 2003). Meyer and Scott (1992), for example, suggest that in addition to 'public' ideologies, or the ideologies of the press, there are 'professional' ideologies where official culture, like religion, serves as the opi-

ate of the masses and is used to suppress consciousness. Further, Herman and Chomsky (1988) employ a wide range of analytical techniques, including content analysis, to demonstrate ways in which the mass media is used to ‘manufacture consent’.

One perspective of the ownership influence on information communication has been the phenomenon of institutionalisation, namely an impersonal and universal trend. The alternative reality is that information authenticity depends on the individual who creates, presents, stores and/or retrieves information, thus introducing subjectivity to message communication within a pluralist democracy. Such subjectivity emerging from a concentrated ownership of communication channels is, in essence, a form of oligopoly and/or monopoly which, for some time now, has been deemed as problematic (Olson, 1982).

Yet, the IT industry is still considered by some to buck the trend of oligopolistic dominance of channels of communication (*The Week*, 2004b). Take the monopolistic dominance and control through patents and copyrights laws of Microsoft which guarantees its high profits. For example, £739 (the price of a personal computer) consists of £299 for the hardware and £440 for licence fees for Window XP-Pro and Microsoft-Office (*The Week*, 2004b). Its European competitor is the ‘open source’ software with its bottom-up development approach allowing the user to modify and test the source code as long as the modifications are kept in the public domain. Codes for operating systems such as Linux and UNIX are freely available and are considered of a higher quality. There are no licence fees, only charges for the maintenance of the system. In Germany, Munich and Dortmund city councils, and in the UK, West Yorkshire Police have converted to the Linux operating system. The US Air Force, US Department of Agriculture and the US Department of Energy, have also made the switch (*The Week*, 2004b).

Yet where little or no substantive resource alternatives exist, there is increasing evidence that dominant, oligopolistic elites influence and shape government policies which result in subsidies to certain industry sectors, such as energy, farming and the military (UFE, 2003), and enormous tax concessions and regulatory loopholes that help the rich but are without relevance to the poor (Olson, 1982; Hartung, 1996; Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 2001). In turn, this creates high concentrations of gains in income and the wealth for the top 1.0 per cent who hold enormous power (Krugman, 2004). In 1998, the top 0.01 per cent, a mere 13,000 citizens, received more than 3.0 per cent of all income in the US (Krugman, 2004).

Moreover, the concentration of capital also creates a concentration of dominant opinion amongst the community of businessmen who purchase media channels (Table 1). For example, Bagdikian (2000: 43) documents media consolidation and addresses its affect on journalism over the last two decades. Bagdikian (2000: 43) reports a decline in the number of large companies that control most of the US print, broadcast, motion picture and cable TV media outlets – from 50 corporations in 1984 to 10 in 1997 and just five in 2001 – leading to blatant “manipulation of news to pursue the owner’s other financial goals”. Furthermore, this power over the process constrains the decision-making abilities of news Editors acting as intermediaries between the public and government (Bagdikian, 2000). The consequences of media consolidation are (Lowry *et al.*, 2004):

- ◆ The reduction of quality and variety of content, as fewer people decide what to air (conglomerates insist that their subsidiaries run shows created in-house and promote the same story lines).
- ◆ The concentration of power in the hands of few media giants creates oligopolistic behaviour (less competition and higher prices for cable and satellite subscribers).
- ◆ Large companies control content and distribution.

Table 1

Mega Media Dominance of Content, News and Distribution Channels

Enterprise	Content	Distribution Channels
Comcast, if merger with Disney took place, would have created the world's biggest media company (Regis Roberts and Eisner)	Entertainment and news: Cable channels (sport, movies, animation), theme parks and sport teams.	21 million cable households, internet telephony and other digital services.
News Corporation (Rupert Murdoch)	News, Entertainment and publishing: TV satellite, cable, picture studio (20th Century Fox), over 100 newspapers, publishing house (HarperCollins).	TV satellite service, cable channels worldwide (12 million subscribers in the US).
Time Warner (Richard D. Parsons)	Entertainment, news: Cable channels, TV network, picture studio (Warner Bros.), cinema movie studios, magazines (Time, People).	11 million cable subscribers, digital services with 23 million AOL members in the US and 6.4 million in the EU.
Viacom (Redsone)	News, entertainment and publishing: TV networks, cable channels, picture studio (Paramount Pictures), publishing (Simon & Schuster), radio network and billboard.	39 TV stations (covering 44 per cent of the US), 2 satellite-TV operators with 9 million subscribers, 180 radio stations.
GE/NBC	Entertainment and news: TV Networks, cable channels, production studio.	28 TV stations (covering 30 per cent of US households).

Source: Compiled from Lowry *et al.* (2004).

Moreover, the community of businessmen who fund the media through advertising further constrain editorial judgement and the freedom of civic or public journalism (Ewen, 1976; Rosen, 1992; Fallows, 1996; Aiken, 1997; Bagdikian, 2000; Alterman, 2003). Until 1996, when Congress passed laws eliminating the national ownership cap and permitting companies to own up to eight stations in certain markets, no single company could own more than 40 stations nationally in the US (McBride and Squeo, 2004). In June 2003, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) facilitated a law allowing a company to own more media outlets – newspaper, radio and TV in a single market (McBride and Squeo, 2004). Whilst Clear Channel's 1,200 stations represent only nine per cent of nation's 13,000 radio stations, they and others are on the brink and many are exceeding cross-ownership limits on radio and TV stations in some markets (Table 2; McBride and Squeo, 2004).

Table 2

Radio-Stations Mega Ownership

Ranking According to Revenues	Radio-Station Owner	Number of Stations Owned	
		1999	2004
1	Clear Channel Communications Inc.	512	1,200
2	Viacom Inc.'s Infinity Broadcasting	163	180
3	Citadel	108	213
4	Cumulus Media Inc.	232	301
5	Intercom	42	104
	...	...	...
10	Emmis Communication		27

Source: Compiled from McBride and Squeo (2004).

Such a level of media control goes contrary to democratic principles, where the true art of democratic persuasion requires debate and interaction. Some authors have argued that the manipulation that nurtures selected attitudes and beliefs has been chosen in advance by vested interest elites and is carried out on two levels (Carey, 1996):

- ◆ the grassroots level, which intends to reach as large a number of people as possible in order to change public opinion through a combination of advertising, public relations and opinion-polling activities; and
- ◆ tree-top, or 'upper echelon' level, which aims at influencing the leaders of society such as politicians, bureaucrats, news editors, reporters and economic commentators. The ultimate goal is to set the terms of debate and to determine the kinds of questions that will come to dominate public discussion.

Combining traditional press, broadcasting, educational and entertainment media telecommunications and information technology into multi-media conglomerates allows for contrived control of communication channels (Korac-Kakabadse *et al.*, 2000). Through curtailing which issues are addressed and how they are addressed, people are manipulated into forming and/or changing opinions along lines desired by the originators of the messages – a view not necessarily in the interests of the people being targeted by the message (Carey, 1996). Current concern and debate about the role and manner of operations of Fox News, for example, focus on the extent to which a news network takes on propaganda-like dimensions (Kitty and Greenwald, 2005). The continuous presentation of carefully-crafted messages as 'powerful' arguments, 'decisive' evidence and 'compelling' reasons represent power that is enacted as an external force that distorts and allows domination to occur (Mumford and Beekman, 1994; Mendelberg, 2002). Moreover, the constant repetition of the desired message through various channels of communication, often without awareness, ensures a limiting but nevertheless shared common sense (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Mendelberg, 2002).

Unassuming voters accept the words as a reality of life and become 'prisoners' of organised vocabulary (Zuboff, 1988: 394). This vocabulary, in turn, traps them into a particular way of thinking about themselves as well as their relationships with others (Kouzes and Posner, 1995: 227). Through deliberate distortion, a voter's capacity for spontaneous action is undermined (April, 1999). Continuous exposure to repeated messages promotes a particular ideology, not found in the discourses of the ideologues but in the language of everyday life (Thompson, 1990). ICT media is used to dominate ideology, not only as formally and fully structured 'systems of thought', or 'systems of belief' of 'symbolic practices' which pertain to social action or political projects', but also as a less formal and unstructured process of "sustaining asymmetrical relations of power – that is, the process of maintaining domination" (Thompson, 1990: 4).

Thus, when a variety of communication channels are controlled by a small, but dominant, elite, presented information is shaped as informative authority. This form of pre-established messaging by the communication channel owners (whether capital, labour, design, expertise and constituencies who propose and enact agendas) becomes a powerful tool of control (Giddens, 1985; Habermas, 1987; Hayek, 1988). Habermas (1987: 154), for example, poignantly highlights these phenomena, arguing that modern societies are increasingly autonomous organisations that are connected with one another:

*"via de-linguistified media of communication: these systemic mechanisms – for example, money – steering a social intercourse that has been largely disconnected from norms and values, above all in these subsystems of purposive, rational economic and administrative action that, in Weber's diagnosis, have become independent of their moral-political foundations."*

Schroyer (1971: 297) argues that contemporary science and technology serve as a new strategy for legitimating power and privilege, "in so far as the practice of the scientific establishment is held to be neutral", while actually justifying the extension of repressive control systems, and that the contemporary self-image of science functions as an all-embracing 'technocratic ideology'. Schroyer

(1971: 297) further argues that “the scientist image of science has become a dominant legitimating system of advanced industrial society”. Moreover, Habermas (1987) argues that control or the colonisation of communication channels above a certain threshold may lead to enhanced material reproduction in the short run but will eventually be outweighed by consequent effects on the processes of symbolic reproduction, resulting in the appearance of pathological side-effects such as loss of meaning, alienation, anomie and the withdrawal of legitimacy. Although knowledge and rationality guided by the technical and practical interest can be located in reason itself, an internal demand for the conditions of free and open communication must prevail.

Lang and Lang (1966: 468) argue that the mass media needs to “force attention to certain issues” influencing “what the public should think about, not what they should think”. Hence, the mass media needs to be a source of (Jaensch, 1994):

- ◆ political information which gives all the facts;
- ◆ political opinion and views which access all shades of opinion;
- ◆ uncensored communication of political matters.

The provision of independent communication transparently free from oligopolistic, elite influence on information independence through ownership should draw explicit attention to the social conditions that shape individuals' actions. A key issue is the need for the independence of communication of the mass media. However, recent developments in the UK suggest that the eminence of what is called ‘public service broadcasting’, providing higher quality programming that the market, left to itself, will not provide, is being dismantled (*Times*, 2004). The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) operates under government charter and is funded by licence fees; a flat tax levied on all television households (in 2003, the BBC received £2.7 billion). It was established with the aim of educating, informing, as well as entertaining (to give people not only what they want but also what they need). However, due to the reporting of the David Kelly affair, perceived by the British government as hostility towards government policy on the war in Iraq, the BBC is under threat with its role being reduced and its charter being reviewed in 2006 (*The Economist*, 2004c). Its budget has already been reduced forcing the senior management to re-organise its 28,000 workforce and earmarking 6000 jobs for redundancy, which certain pundits consider will likely effect the quality and scope of delivered programmes (Sabbagh and Sherwin, 2004). The alternative has been to create opportunities for commercial channels to provide content that is designed to place adverts in the limelight providing “reports that are short, sensational and lack balance, with features that emphasise anxiety-inducing trends, continually interrupted by eye catching adverts” the message being that purchase will relieve the problem (Griffiths, 2005).

### **E-democracy: Citizen Participation Desired – Greater Control the Reality!**

The explosive growth in the reliance on institutions outside government to carry out its purposes, even to make policy, questions the value of public accountability (Mosher, 1980). For example, ‘public net-work’ represents the strategic use of ICT (based on networks using Intranets and Extranets) to better implement established public policy goals and programs through direct and diverse stakeholders’ on-line involvement. Although they go beyond ‘one-way’ information and service delivery toward ‘two-way’ and ‘many-to-many’ exchanges of information, knowledge and experience, they are designed to facilitate the online exchange of such information, knowledge and experience among those doing similar public work. Thus, governments hosting public net-work initiatives are shifting from their role as ‘sole providers’ of public services to facilitators of those working to solve similar public problems, thus sharing or transferring services to private providers (Aiken, 1997; Clift, 2003). These public net-works use E-democracy tools initially developed for the *input* side of government decision-making to the *output* side of public administration which, in turn, may provide for cost efficiencies and a more significant return for e-government investment in information exchange and online community tools (Clift, 2003).

Public net-works are hosted and/or funded by private enterprise, government agencies, inter-governmental associations, international government bodies, partnerships involving many public

entities, non-governmental organisations and, whilst they are generally open to the public, they are focused on specific issues that attract niche stakeholder involvement from other government agencies, local governments, non-governmental organisations and interested citizens. They are not about online public consultations early in the decision-making process nor directly connected to representative institutions or processes (Clift, 2003). Thus, organisations and/or groups of individuals who have resources and are willing to work with government to meet particular needs are enabled to pursue their joint-established missions to participate in government rather than involving the disfranchised citizen (The House of Commons, 2004).

Often, these interest groups are current or potential contractors of government service on the basis that governments are increasingly using public net-work mechanisms for transferring public policy into private choices. In fact, "the public use of private interests is consciously prompted as a technique of effective government" (Crenson and Ginsberg, 2002: 241). Thus, 'lobbying friends' prevails not only between privately organised interests and politicians (Kollman, 1997) but "friendly information transformation prevails between organised interests" such as public networks which, in turn, reduce the influence of citizens (Carpenter *et al.*, 2004: 243) as these public networks are monopolised by vested interests while the "presence of citizens in the process is increasingly a statistical matter of virtual representation through polling" (Crenson and Ginsberg, 2002: 104). The net result is of a politics utilising ICT for public control purposes, resembling Bentham's Panopticon vision where a select elite is locked into political conflict high above the people they presumably represent adopting a doctrine of authoritarian leadership, as proposed by Hobbes (1997), over citizens positioned to obey authority in the knowledge that their "voluntary act must be shored up by psychological motives, above all fear, because the leader will not always adhere to his bargain" (Hobbes, 1997: 114).

The counter argument to the Panopticon view of the future is that of the 'neutral host' facilitation role, supported by sustained government funding. The 'host' generates trust, a sense of momentum, relevance and ensures that participation by citizens is viewed as relevant to achieving public missions through broad, horizontal information exchanges (Clift, 2003). Government partnerships, with their public missions and resources, often make ideal hosts. Equally, facilitation models involving NGOs and academic consortiums have potential and may be further developed but they require more scrutiny, especially when resources from other than government are made available for this purpose (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2004). On the basis that these initiatives do not support centralised information clearinghouses but use ICT in a fundamental, distributed and integrated way (Clift, 2003), the Jeffersonian vision of democracy is achievable and the public interest will carry weight in political debate about the preservation of core democratic values of liberty, equality and commonality, capturing Rousseau's (1962: 262) argument that the incorporation of people into society involves not a mere compact but the creation of "a moral and collective body which, receives from this very act of constitution its unity, its dispersed self, and its will".

However, media control in the hands of the few is endemic. For example, as part of its "*Working for America*" initiative, the US Office of Personnel Management website (OPM) created the official Federal Government's site, the 'USAJOBS', a one-stop source for Federal jobs and employment information (Fountain, 2004). Being the Bush administration's specially designated e-government project, extra pressure has been placed on OPM to develop the system quickly having awarded the contract, in January 2003, to Monster.com to perform a number of services (Fountain, 2004). These include a re-design of the USAJOBS site; a re-design of "Studentjobs.gov", a site for college students and graduates seeking federal internships and jobs; providing an information phone system; computer hosting for the jobs site and development of a resume-database and tracking system (Fountain, 2004). Further, the criteria for an applicant's selection or rejection is embedded in the software provided by Monster.com and cannot easily be challenged (Fountain, 2004). The fact that TMP, the Monster.com's parent company, has been permitted to make changes affecting the acceptability of its quotation, underscores the influence of vested interests (Dunleavy, 2004).



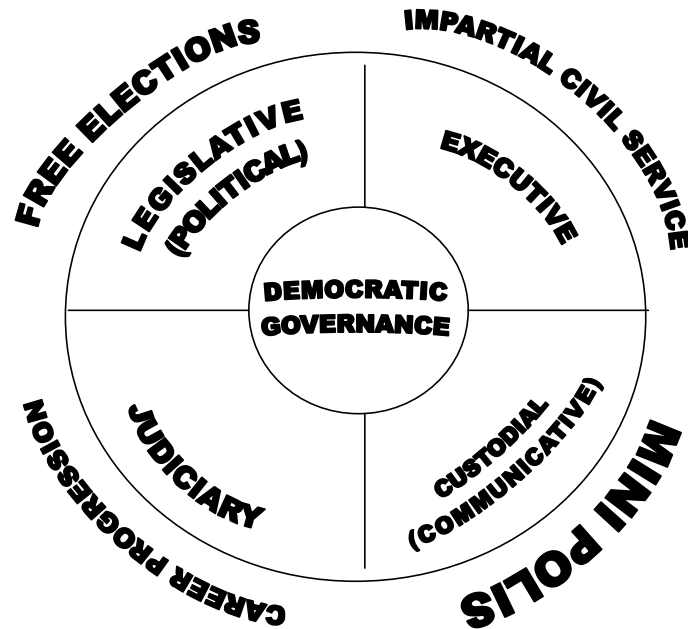
## **Way Forward: Legislating for the Fourth Organ of the Democratic Project**

Over time, each form of democratic governance is tested, as competition and choice are the processes, which bring long-term, broadly-based benefits to the public. Political influence, particularly through favouritism, threatens to destabilise these processes and undermine democracy. In the information era of an increasingly inter-connected world, where the balance of power shifts beyond the reach of national borders and the control of national governments, this test is ever greater and the pressure to identify dys-functionality ever pressing. There is a need, in the first instance, for more transparency. As argued in this paper, the extent to which communication channels are controlled through concentrated ownership, as well as ICT media capability for subtle and invisible centralisation of information, needs to be transparent to all media users and citizens. The exercise of power in the communication process can subvert not only democratic values but democratic processes and structures and prevent the open and free discussion necessary for enhancing democratic processes of participation and further developing social capital and the public domain. As ICT is enacted in a political, social and organisational context, e-government, is positioned as an opportunity through technology-mediated interaction between government and the public sphere, which in reality reinforces the institutionalised patterns that currently exist (Fountain, 2004). As argued, these socialised patterns run counter to the benefit of the citizen and for this reason people have both a theoretical and a practical interest in securing and expanding the future of democracy.

Dahl (1956) contests that modern societies needed to make a concerted effort to form new institutional structures which would allow for the realisation, to some extent, however imperfect, of democratic ideas. Despite writing in the 1950s, Dahl's (1956) perspective applies to new ICT, emphasising the capacity to nurture new institutions supportive of a wider 'attentive public'. This public, in turn, could create a check on the dominant elites "influencing governmental decisions, not only directly but also indirectly, through their influence on public and elite opinion" (Dahl, 1956: 339). Fishkin (1992) further adds to Dahl's (1956) vision by promoting the deliberative public opinion poll. ICT can be used effectively to improve the 'multi-step process' of public opinion formation wherein information moves interactively between mass media, government organs and the public – an open system of social deliberation and inquiry, within the context of an election cycle, but only if a new organ of the democratic project is constitutionalised. If that happens, so that free public communication and interaction are developed, it is possible for democracy to be revitalised as "a necessary condition for the development of a strong and positive democratic political identity is the ability to talk about politics with others" (Schneider, 1995: 1). The new organ needs to provide balance to existing legislative, executive and judicial structures in order to ensure that citizens can be informed in a deliberative manner so that democratic values can be upheld and new values and social policies negotiated.

By citizens being better informed concerning the nature of current issues and their promotion, the need for expensive political campaigns to attract sufficient voters to realise majorities by continuously presenting only a particular slant, can be reduced (Brownstein, 2002; Walczek *et al.*, 2004). To reduce, even more, the need for campaign money, free advertising space and airtime on television and radio, column space in the print media and space on certain portals, equal value could be given to candidates (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2003). In the US 2004 election, for example, over US\$1.45 billion had been spent in national, local and state elections, typically on television spots during the final months of the campaign (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2004). The, by now, established practice of sophisticated polling techniques being used to allow candidates to target narrow slices of truncated and already attentive audiences with political advertising crafted to their interests, ignores possible, but marginalised, voters (Crenson and Ginsberg, 2002). Development of direct mailing tactics, computerised databases and new possibilities for campaigning on the Internet all make targeted or customised campaigning a political growth industry (Crenson and Ginsberg, 2002). Additionally, a more comprehensive requirement for transparency with all public donations and the abolition of devious funding routes need to be considered to reduce, if not completely eliminate, opportunistic and corruptive power abuses.

As emphasised, the new democratic organ needs to be the guardian for the freedom of communication; particularly from concentrated media ownership and other power elites. The new organ is a custodian of free communication oriented towards understanding rather than the strategic objective of persuading (Habermas, 1979). The organ for the protection of communicative expression of democracy needs to be concerned with un-biased or objective transformations of subjective information in the general process of democratic communication (Dewey, 1989). The identified problem that needs addressing is how distortions in communication, resulting from the specific motives and interests of various groups, may be overcome in a democratic manner?



Source: Compiled by the authors.

Fig. 1. Proposed Model of Democracy

The new democratic organ needs to offer the citizen the opportunity to realistically practise such democratic rights as free speech, free assembly and the right to form political parties through a press and media that offers the full spectrum of views and positions on present day issues. Moreover, the new organ, built on the principles democratic ideas, will create a transparent democratic process at local, regional, national and international levels. Only through the process of genuine, Jeffersonian-oriented, deliberative democracy can be upheld and passed to the next generation. Free communication is required in order to facilitate expression of the natural tensions stemming from subjective needs and demands that are the necessary mechanisms for informed deliberation and declining dependence upon communication-channel ownership.

The new organ would have a custodial function, which would ensure that a mass media provides a source of unmediated political and other information (Jaensch, 1994). This, in turn, could ensure that media is independent (for example, maximum five per cent ownership by anyone individual/company/interest group of press, media or any other electronic and communicative channel) so that on-going competitive tensions are preserved and, in turn, democratic checks and balances prevail on the legislative/executive and judicial arms of government (Figure 1). Greater informed citizen participation through the greater transparency of events and dominant interest coalitions is argued as only possible through the constitutionalisation of a democratic organ that guarantees the furtherance of democratic processes, irrespective of the form of participative or representative Democracy adopted. Membership to the fourth organ needs to be open to all citizens, drawn from all per centiles of society, proportionally elected for a period that is longer than the presidential but

shorter than the congressional term but with no more than one term of office for each candidate with their job being guaranteed on their return (in effect, unpaid leave of absence for the duration of office).

## **Conclusion**

If the potential of ICT is to be put to use in enhancing democratic processes and the Jeffersonian vision is to be achieved, then a new democratic organ is required to ensure that democratic values are preserved. Moreover these organs must also preside over public affairs and require all citizens to “contribute by their votes to the exercise of power, grant them a right of control and supervision by expressing their opinions: and, by forming them through practice for these elevated functions, give them both the desire and the right to discharge these” (Constant, 1988: 328).

Differences in expressed opinion need to be subject to further argument and reflection at higher levels of practical discourse. Free and open communication and deliberation, without constraint on discussion, and the framing of questions and liberated from a framework of domination, lead to consensus among the participating majority whereby the force of better argument prevails (Habermas, 1987; Mendelberg, 2002). However, the need for a plurality of free information is challenged by a reality that power relationships, based on the connections between communication-channel ownership and the domain of practical social life, come into existence as a result of systematically-distorted communications under the disguise of legitimated action by the few.

Drawing on the political theory of the ‘general will’ of the people and on the concept of government, Dworkin (2000: 117) argues that “in a democracy the rulers have a right to rule only on the basis that they have ‘equal concern’ for the people they rule. It is what legitimises government”. He further argues that if government does not show equal concern for its citizens, then it can be accused of illegitimacy (Stein and Bickers, 1997). To be legitimate, the government must enjoy the consent of the people over whom it governs. In essence, sovereignty and legitimacy in democracy are derived from, and remain with, the people.

The elected government is the agent or trustee for the governed, who retain the mandate to decide who should govern whom and under which conditions representatives act in the elected assembly, primarily in terms of their own consciousness (Burke, 1986). The electronic, Bentham Panopticon of governing elites and their control over powerful databases and political processes, is not inevitable. ICT offers an opportunity for allowing the Jeffersonian vision of a more participatory model of democracy. Thus the need for debate on what kind of democracy is wanted is urgent. The increased use of ICT for policy formulation and citizen profiling carries within it inherent, central control (UNDP, 2003). The use of ICT for a growing myriad of atomized groups, whether virtual or physical, which share pluralistic and independent information through traditional communication channels of orality, is also growing and is indispensable for a democratic polity.

There is a need to invoke debate about how far, and in what areas of the socio-economic sphere, organs of government need to be involved. The inherent paradox of representative democracy is expressed as that of government control versus the freedom dilemma. “How can private power be prevented from threatening the freedom of others? At the same time, how can power, conferred on institutions for this purpose, be prevented from enhancing power to the point of destroying the very freedom it ought to protect?” (Amato, 1997: 3). In order to debate the state of the realm (Post, 1964: 322), there is a need for an effective and free communicative infrastructure. Thus, to uphold democratic values, it is a duty of government organs to maintain honourable and prosperous conditions on behalf of the state (de Viterbo, 1901: 232). Instead of leaving the “imitational imagination” to determine the best way to include citizens in administrative decision-making, as suggested by Habermas (1996b: 441), it is argued here that there is a need for constitutionalising a fourth organ of government; the custodian that will ensure that free communication content and channels of communication are equitably accessible by all citizens.

Ensuring for diversity of communication through liberalising and spreading broadly the ownership and control of ICT and other channels of communication, will be the fourth organ's first challenge. Through such constitutionalisation and initial action collaborative government, as suggested by Kelly (2004), is better positioned to meet the demand of a robust and accountable, popular sovereignty.

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