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Communication Technologies for Accountability

Anne-Katrin Arnold

Introduction

Accountability depends on the flow of information. Citizens need information about public services to hold their government accountable for those services—without knowledge of how things are and how things should be, there is not much for which citizens can request accountability. Citizens themselves need to be able to communicate with the government to voice their grievances and articulate their demands to those responsible for providing them with goods and services. To have their voices heard by the government, citizens need communication platforms and channels that amplify their demands and communicate whether or not they award the government with legitimacy. Access to information, voice, and a communication infrastructure therefore seem to be among the main prerequisites for effective accountability.

In the ideal world of a democratic public sphere, mass media are the major players in the space between civil society and government and facilitate communication between both. The media convey information from the government to the citizens and provide a space for deliberation, producing public opinion, which is then channeled back to the government. If this loop is undistorted and uninterrupted, accountability should be a logical outcome.

However, the communication loop between government and civil society is distorted and disrupted. Economic and political pressures shape the public sphere and distort communication flows, limiting citizens' possibilities to form considered public opinion and demand accountability. In this context, information and communication technology (ICT) has been hailed as a means

for citizens to reclaim their place in the public sphere. The following discussion will show that ICT is far from being a universal remedy, but does indeed provide potential for rebalancing the communication flows in the public sphere and giving citizens a stronger voice in demanding accountability.

In this chapter, I will describe the role of traditional mass media for accountability and will point out their problems and shortcomings in providing the three communication prerequisites of accountability: access, voice, and infrastructure. I will then discuss the potential of ICT for overcoming these obstacles—or not.

To set up this discussion, I will briefly position the role of the media and communication technologies in the context of the public sphere, discuss the merits and problems of mass media as well as ICT for providing the prerequisites for effective accountability, and then draw on real-world examples to illustrate the potential of ICT to give citizens improved means for holding their government accountable.

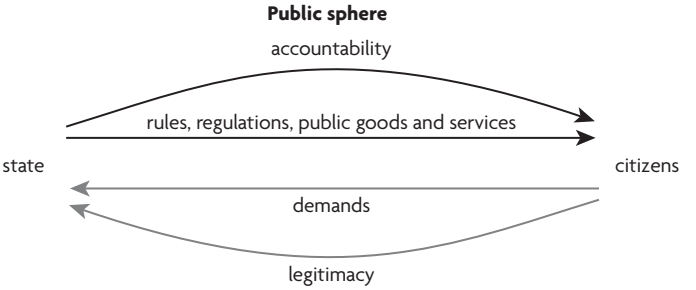
A word of caution: A large part of the theoretical discussion in this chapter is based on research on Western countries. This is due to a lack of systematic study of the social, and partly of the economic and political, characteristics of mass media systems in developing countries. However, I will incorporate a developing country focus wherever possible and will highlight the role of ICT in the developing world in the second part of this chapter, which deals with real-world examples of how ICT is used to strengthen accountability in a development context.

ICT, Accountability, and the Public Sphere

The discussion of ICT's functions and potentials for accountability starts with a strongly simplified model of Jürgen Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere. Habermas (1991) understands the public sphere as space between state and civil society. In this space, government and citizens exchange information and services: Citizens communicate their demands to the government and, if satisfied with how these are met by the government, reward legitimacy to the government in office. The government provides rules, regulations, and public goods and services to the citizens. As has been argued throughout this book, the mere delivery of services without accountability is not sufficient to achieve good governance. Habermas did not consider accountability as part of the public sphere, but here it will be assumed to be a prerequisite for citizens awarding legitimacy to the government. A very simplified model of Habermas's work (1991, 2006), with accountability as an added factor, systematizes the public sphere and its communication flows as shown in figure 12.1.

The public sphere must provide an infrastructure for these exchanges to happen. Apart from the delivery of services and goods, the exchange flows in figure 12.1 are information flows: The government provides rules, regulations, and accountability, and the citizens make demands and provide legitimacy in

Figure 12.1. Exchanges between States and Citizens



Source: Adapted from Habermas 1991, 2006.

the form of feedback to the government. The mass media have traditionally been one of the most important channels for communication in the public sphere.

From figure 12.1, we can deduce a number of essential requirements for a functional communication between state and citizens through the public sphere. If the public sphere is understood as infrastructure for public discourse, it must provide *communication channels and platforms for citizen demand.* The nature of communication in the public sphere is clearly two-way: The government provides *information* to citizens, and citizens need *voice* to express their demands as well as their loyalty to the state (legitimacy). This is a simple formula: There is two-way communication between the state (information) and civil society (voice) that is transmitted through the infrastructure of the public sphere (channels and platforms for citizen demand).

As Habermas (1991, 2006) posits, today's public sphere is distorted so that not all of these three prerequisites are fulfilled in a way that government and citizens alike have opportunities to make use of information flows. Political and economic interests interrupt communication channels to and from citizens, constraining citizens' roles in the public sphere and their ability to hold governments accountable. In the following section, I will discuss how mass media and ICT can be subject to distortions in the public sphere and will ask whether ICT has the potential to level the playing field for citizens to some degree.

Access to Information

Access to information is a core prerequisite for citizens to exercise their rights in any form of government. Without information they cannot know what their government is doing, which services they are eligible for, what the general state of those services is, what other people's experience with regard to those services is, which political factions work toward citizens' needs, and which do not. In general, citizens cannot make informed political decisions without access to information. ICT plays a fundamental role in this regard, and this role extends beyond the abilities of traditional media.

In democracies, the information-providing function of ICT mainly deals with political decision making: no information, no informed decision that aims at improving an individual's situation or the situation of society. The normative assumption underlying democracy is the idea of active citizens choosing who should govern a country—elections are the ultimate means of holding governments accountable. According to Ramsden (1996), the core of democracy is choice; therefore, voters have to be enabled to make an informed choice. The electorate can make informed decisions only if they are aware of qualifications, characters, issue positions, political philosophies, and the office in question. For Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954), a rational decision is an issue-based one. The voter should be knowledgeable—aware and informed about issues, their history, the relevant facts, the alternatives, the consequences, and the parties' or candidates' position on them. Democratic theory wants voters to carefully consider the candidates' position and their own, eventually deciding for the candidate closest to them (Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan 2005). The role of information is evident here. Campaigns are a vital part of the democratic process and should ideally provide information enabling voters to make informed decisions about which party or candidate is closest to their preferred issue policy. Campaigns strongly rely on the media, and as recent examples in the United States have shown, new media technologies have proven to be effective tools in campaigning.[1]

The role of ICT in autocratic states is a different one, but may be even more important for enabling citizens to hold their governments accountable. Because these countries lack the most obvious means of accountability—elections—and often also lack the most simple information mechanisms from the government—public information provision—ICT must bridge a considerable gap that traditional media have not been able to close. Several factors hinder the ability of television, newspapers, and to some extent radio to provide an avenue for accountability, which may to some degree be overcome by ICT.

Technical reach: In developing countries with low technological standards, television and newspapers are unlikely to reach a large audience. Television sets are relatively expensive and need mechanisms such as antennas or cable boxes to receive broadcasts. Newspapers require a distribution infrastructure as well as an advanced degree of literacy to be effective in disseminating information. In remote areas and in poor countries in general, both are unlikely. Radio is the one traditional mass medium that has a wide reach across developing countries. Radio sets are relatively cheap to produce, as is radio content. In terms of technical reach, radio as of now outperforms any new information technology: The Internet, especially broadband Internet, remains a medium for the more affluent classes and has not yet reached a significant degree of penetration in the developing world. Computers and any related connectivity are rare in the global South. Mobile phones may be the only ICT that soon may come to rival radio. In mid-2009, people used

4.06 billion mobile phones.[2] Because mobile phones are increasingly able to combine technologies of both traditional and new media—television, Internet, and newspapers over the Internet—they may be able to reach audiences that have been elusive for most mass and individual communication technologies so far. Mobile phones provide a technical foundation for media convergence: Several different kinds of media come together in one device. This device then provides a single access point to information and participation in communication.

Literacy: In Western democracies, newspapers have been shown to be the most reliable and trusted source of political information, at least as compared to radio and television (for example, Moy and Scheufele 2000). Reading a newspaper, however, does require basic literacy as well as a certain experience with regard to processing written and possibly abstract information. This limits the utility of newspapers for information in the poorest countries considerably. In addition to basic literacy, researchers have pointed to the importance of media literacy for being able to utilize information effectively. Where basic literacy is low, media literacy is unlikely to be in better shape. Radio is a possible exception because it does not require basic literacy and possibly only a lower degree of media literacy to be utilized. Radio messages can be simple or elaborate so that listeners with different levels of education and information-processing capacities can be addressed. Of course, literacy—both basic and with regard to media—is also one of the biggest obstacles for most ICT as means for accountability. Internet users, for instance, require considerable technical abilities in addition to literacy, as well as the ability to find relevant and trustworthy information online. The general openness of the Internet is an opportunity for dialogue on the one hand, but a danger for getting lost in an overwhelming amount of information with varying degrees of usefulness and trustworthiness on the other. If one considers the sheer amount of available information and sources, the Internet may even require the highest literacy rate of all communication technologies potentially available to citizens. Mobile phones as a platform for the convergence of communication technologies may not overcome the literacy requirements for using the Internet, but they can provide services that require less literacy, such as television content. They still require technical and basic literacy, but may reduce the level that is necessary for making effective use of the technology.

Economic and political pressures: In developing countries, traditional media are mostly privately financed, donor financed, or controlled by the government. If a medium is commercially organized, economic pressures may stand in the way of its use as a channel for accountability. Market competition may lead to an overly strong focus on soft news that attracts wider audiences or on communication that benefits, for instance, advertisers (for more discussion on this and related issues see Norris and Odugbemi 2009). In many developing countries, strong political players own large parts of the media and thereby have a convenient alley into the public sphere for their own political convictions.

These dangers seem to be less relevant for new communication technologies. The Internet in particular provides access to information and communication for people with very little political or economic clout. In several countries, recent political developments have shown how citizens circumvent political interests by circumventing national borders—or servers. However, ICT is subject to a mix of economic and political pressures that regard not so much content as infrastructure. Digital frequencies and Universal Mobile Telecommunications Service (UMTS) licenses are often auctioned off by governments, opening up possibilities for economic pressures (such as the highest bidder) and political corruption (such as awarding frequencies and licenses to political or other allies). Again, it seems that mobile phones have a strong potential to overcome these problems. Mobile phones in the hands of an individual can reach a large number of people without the drawback of politically or economically marked content. Even in this case, however, one must be aware of the dangers of interception of communication and locating phone users that are deemed political opponents. Indeed, the advantages of mobile phones provide opportunities not only for citizens asking for accountability, but also for extreme and destructive forces.

Voice

Years ago, the magazine *The New Yorker* printed a now-famous cartoon of a dog sitting in front of a computer with the caption "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog." This line highlights the unique feature of the Internet that on the Web, anyone can be (almost) anything, including a citizen, a speaker for human rights, and a champion of democracy. This is a matter not only of anonymity, but also of voice, its reach, its magnification, and its echo.

Two-way communication first and foremost means not only that the government that has means for communicating to its citizens, but also that citizens have the possibility of communicating back to the government, that they have the chance to be heard. Traditional media are mostly one-way communication channels, with only a few and limited openings for citizen feedback. Citizens can indeed write letters to the editors, or call in to a radio talk show, but these means allow only a few individual voices into the arena of public discourse. ICT, on the other hand, not only allows for a wide range of communication forms and channels that citizens can use, but also magnifies their voices and thereby increases their chances of making the government responsive.

Bourdieu, who had little sympathy for television, nevertheless saw a chance for social groups and movements to achieve greater visibility through media coverage of their positions and activities.[3] This effect, which can be squashed by economic and political pressures, is potentially much stronger through ICT, especially through the Internet. Politically active citizens can use the Internet

to build their own public, to benefit from expertise available on the Internet, to recruit followers and thereby increase the size and reach of their network, and to organize their activities (DiMaggio and others 2001; Rheingold 2000; Wellman and others 2001). Costs for mobilizing on the Internet are relatively low because physical presence is not required, political risks can be minimized through anonymity, and economic cost does not exceed the costs of actually going online. Research on these issues mainly comes from Western countries, but it may be argued that the principle of mobilization through ICT can be applied to the developing world.

When ICT magnifies the voices of citizens, however, it also magnifies the voices of individuals and groups that are not supportive of democracy. When violence broke out after the 2007 general elections in Kenya, several radio stations were accused of inciting or at least supporting aggressive action by calling for violent acts against groups of people. New communication technologies increase the reach of hate speech considerably. Hate speech abounds on the Internet, and because the Internet is—and should be—widely unregulated, access to those sites cannot be restricted. Citizens again need a considerable degree of literacy to correctly interpret extremist information. Citizen demand for accountability is no doubt a vital part of public discourse. The same principles that allow for citizen participation in public discourse also allow for disruptions and violations of the rules of public discourse. Fighting the danger of hate speech on the Internet, however, would open all avenues to fighting citizen communication through the Internet. This we can see in several countries that censor the Internet, publicly citing extremist and disruptive forces as motives, but indirectly closing communication channels for legitimate citizen voices.

Channels and Platforms for Citizen Demand

Just as ICT provides the infrastructure for a two-way flow of information between citizens and government, it also provides the infrastructure for a public forum modeled after the ideal of the ancient agora. An ideal agora brings together diverse and plural viewpoints that serve as the basis for informed public deliberation. According to Norris and Odugbemi (2009, 18), "this process is perhaps most critical in postconflict states and deeply divided societies, as a way of encouraging dialogue, tolerance, and interaction among diverse communities, reducing the underlying causes of conflict, and building the conditions for lasting peace."

Traditional media in the West face realities that hinder the establishment of an agora of equal voices. Political and economic interests inhibit access to communication channels for citizens. Market-based media systems make it difficult for citizens to be heard. Only a few lines of access exist, most of them administered by a profession that is reliant on the economic powers that pay their wages and the political powers that provide their stories. Letters to the

editor—selected by the editor and possibly edited—and a few seconds of opinion in a television or radio street survey can by no means constitute a public discourse. Radio call-in shows have a stronger resemblance to citizen participation in the public sphere. A somewhat recent television phenomenon—talent shows that ask viewers to vote over the Internet or mobile phone for their favorite candidate—have been hailed as truly democratic and may indeed have a higher turnout than major elections. It is obvious, however, that the subject of the vote in such cases has very little to do with the subject of democracy. Not only is the outcome of such votes of little relevance to the lives of the people, but even the fundamental mechanism of the public sphere—deliberation—is missing entirely.

The situation may be less bleak in developing countries, at least with regard to opportunities for citizens to insert their voices into the public dialogue somehow. Radio has low technical and editorial barriers, allowing citizens to use it to make their voices heard. Television and newspapers, on the other hand, tend to be influenced by political and economic factions.

Convergence

Every new technology offers new opportunities—but also new challenges. The Internet provides an abundance of information that has not been available to any generation of citizens before ours. As the amount of information grows, however, the need for information literacy is growing as well. Just because citizens now get their news online does not mean they get their news from someone else. The most trusted and most used online news sources in Western countries typically are the major news sources offline: BBC, the *New York Times,* and others. Those trusted news sources acquire wider reach through ICT—the old content converges with the new technology. Small independent radio stations can get their news online and broadcast it to even the most remote areas, and the *New York Times* could be "read" in the poorest communities just as well as on Wall Street. Similarly, BBC breaking news can reach even the most rural villages through smart phones that allow access to online sources. Content is available on different platforms, in real time or on demand.

Regulators are challenged with two basic forms of convergence. Technical convergence concerns the merging of delivery technologies—infrastructures—such as mobile phones, radio, television, and satellite. Content convergence refers to the possibility of providing the same content on different platforms. A third form of convergence might be most challenging to regulators: Content actually merges with technology. Telecommunication providers produce Internet content, and telephone companies provide Internet services: We may term this institutional convergence, although there is also a strong economic component. ICT has been regarded as a matter of telecommunication, regulated quite differently and by different administrative bodies than traditional media

as a matter of information dissemination. Issues of hate speech, pornography, intellectual property, and freedom of information have not been a regular focus of agencies that work on the distribution of frequencies, provider competition, auctioning UMTS licenses, and the like.

Henten, Samarajiva, and Melody (2006) illustrate convergence in a matrix with horizontal convergence at the level of technology as well as at the level of content, and with vertical convergence of technology and content (table 12.1). Different technologies have been regulated differently in the past, but there is now a general shift toward treating technology in a neutral manner. The European Union, for instance, applies technology-neutral regulation.

Content convergence also happens at the horizontal level of this matrix. For example, content on the Internet is currently treated differently than content on television. Because of the digital nature of the content, however, a television show can easily be broadcast online. Regulators here face the issue of extending provisions for television content (for example, the ban on pornography or hate speech) to the Internet, which so far has been unregulated in this regard. Should provisions be extended, issues of freedom of speech would be raised and, most acutely, issues of how to enforce them.

The biggest challenge is convergence on the vertical level of this matrix. Great Britain, for instance, is addressing this challenge by uniting five regulatory bodies into one, the Office of Communications, that has authority both for content and for technology regulation.

The regulatory challenge of conversion cannot be discussed in this chapter. However, we need to address the consequences for considered public opinion as a crucial instrument of accountability. We have already established that ICT provides new and possibly alternative channels of public discourse. The danger, then, is information overload, information chaos, and information anarchy. Public opinion will not be considered—will strictly speaking not even be public—if citizens get very different information from very different sources with undetermined reliability. If, however, ICT is used in a complementary manner to traditional—established—media, it is possible that additional channels will add alternative content that can then be counterchecked against the products of the traditional media.

Table 12.1. Convergence/Integration and Divergence/Disintegration

	ICT	Telecom	Broadcasting	Other media
Content/services	Software-based content	Telecom-based services and content	Broadcast programs	Film, music, newspapers, and so on
Transport/software	Software	Network services	Transmission	Cinema, video rentals, and so on
Equipment/hardware	ICT hardware	Telecom equipment	Broadcast equipment	Reproduction of films, printing, and so on

Source: Henten, Samarajiva, and Melody 2006, 2.

Being a participant in the public sphere not only requires having a voice, but also requires getting information in the first place. Before citizens can demand accountability, they need to know about their right to do so and about the mechanisms available to them. ICT in convergence with traditional media provides new opportunities to establish this direction of the communication flow. Because the same content can be broadcast through different technologies, content can have a wider, but also a more targeted, reach. In a hypothetical exemplary developing country, the majority of people will be reached by shortwave radio with local, national, and international broadcasts. Few will be reached via satellites, a small elite will read the vernacular press, and even fewer will read international press. Many will have mobile phones, but only a few will have computers with access to the Internet, and they will mostly be in cities that have a university. Media audits need to determine which communication channels have the widest reach, and which reach exactly the audience that is supposed to be targeted. If a campaign to promote accountability needs to reach a large part of the population, a mix of the most popular media will be most effective. A campaign that addresses the rights and means of rural populations to hold public officials accountable will be more successful using radio than advertising in the *International Herald Tribune.*

ICT Applications for Accountability

For discussing specific ICT applications for accountability, we return to figure 12.1 on the exchanges between state and citizens in the public sphere. The state delivers public goods and services, rules, regulations, and accountability. Citizens deliver demands and legitimacy, which both can be subsumed under the term *citizen voice.* In countries with restricted media systems or with a strong economic influence on the media, mass media can only insufficiently transmit all of this, or all of this with equal bandwidth. ICT provides opportunities to broaden the reach of citizen voice and to encourage and enable an accountable response from the state. Indeed, many small projects utilize ICT to foster governments' accountability toward citizens and citizens' ability to demand accountability. Scattered attempts have been made to catalog these projects, notable among them the Technology for Transparency Network.[4] The network provides an open source platform that maps and evaluates projects that promote transparency and accountability through the strategic use of ICT. In the spirit of the open Web, everyone can contribute and enter a project into the database. Considering the large number—but limited size—of relevant projects, this approach seems promising to get a grip on a new and not well-documented field.

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that access to information, voice, and platforms and channels for citizen demand are prerequisites for effective accountability. I have also discussed how ICT could help fulfill these prerequisites. In the

following discussion, I will give real-world examples of projects that use the potential of ICT to provide access to information and voice through providing a platform or channel for citizen demand.

A nonsystematic overview of existing initiatives suggests four categories of accountability projects. The groups are distinguished by their focus on different aspects of accountability. *Service accountability* initiatives focus on the quality of service delivery and aim to provide citizens with a feedback channel to the government. Citizen report cards are a classic example of service accountability tools. *Democratic accountability* subsumes projects that work toward improving the political performance of governments, making them more accessible to citizens and providing citizens with a channel to monitor the behavior of governments as political entities. A category that is relevant for the broader international development community is *performance accountability:* tools and projects that assess the overall performance of a state as compared with other states. Relevant tools in this category include indicators such as Freedom House's Freedom of the Press and Transparency International's ranking and other aggregate measures that allow for comparing one country's performance in specific areas of governance with another country's performance. *Transparency,* the fourth category, underlies the other three because accountability rests on information. Transparency projects focus more generally on making information available and accessible, without discriminating for specific government functions. In the following sections, I will briefly describe a few exemplary initiatives for each category.

Service Accountability

Service accountability is about the state taking responsibility for the quality of the public goods and services it delivers to its citizens. For states to be thus accountable, citizens need to have a communication channel through which they can transmit their evaluation of public services. Mass media especially are inhibited from doing this job if they are under political control. Strong economic influence on the mass media also presents a hindrance because local grievances of citizens in particular may not be considered as profitable to sell to a wider audience. Smaller and independent media outfits such as community radio stations should be suitable to pick up issues of service delivery; however, they may not have sufficient political clout to make a difference. ICT can make this difference when the government sanctions them as means of communication, as is the case with the TXT CSC initiative in the Philippines.

TXT CSC is a service provided by the Philippines Civil Service Commission (CSC) that is designed to enable citizens to pressure their government to improve services. Text messaging is the predominant communication channel through which citizens can submit complaints or queries. Corrupt behavior, lack or bad quality of services, or inappropriate behavior by civil servants can

be reported in real time and will, so the CSC promises, be followed up with the appropriate action. The CSC must respond to queries within one day and usually replies with personalized text messages. TXT CSC has also been used in a Public Service Delivery Audit, in which citizens rated public services via text message (Hanna 2004).[5]

Two complaint systems in Malaysia and India serve a similar function. The Malaysian Penang Watch is a group of citizen activists that gather complaints about local services through their website, forward them to the appropriate authorities, remind the responsible officials to take action, and shame them publicly if they do not.[6] According to the initiators, half of the complaints are successful, although slow Internet connections and lack of access to the Internet complicate their work. Kiirti is a petitioning platform set up by the Indian nongovernmental organization (NGO) eMoksha, through which citizens can lodge complaints online or via telephone.[7] Similar problems are aggregated and can be tracked by interested parties. The organization believes that this kind of participation (lodging complaints) increases accountability, which in turn improves government services.[8]

Democratic Accountability

Democratic accountability includes efforts by the state to improve government and governance as well as citizen initiatives to monitor democratic functions of government. E-government is a form of government accountability that is designed to improve government services and access to them and that also provides a certain degree of transparency with regard to democratic functions of the state. E-government is prominent in development work (as well as in developed countries) and may well be one of the oldest forms of ICT for accountability applications. Less established but recently highly relevant is the use of ICT for monitoring elections and the behavior of elected officials. In several elections in the last two years, portable communication technologies have been used by citizens to monitor and in some cases protest the validity of elections.

E-Government

Paul (2007, 176) describes the e-government projects of the government of India's national Capital Territory of Delhi, defining e-governance as "delivery of government services and information to the public using electronic means." The administration here has set up numerous websites designed to enable the public to find and access information about public services. For instance, one website lists the number of applications received under the Right to Information Act, the number of applications disposed of, the amount of information given, the applications in process, and similar information for appeals. The Delhi Registrar of Cooperative Societies maintains an online presence that keeps track of new applications by associations and their membership. The government also publishes tender notices that are supposed to show citizens

what types of civil works are being undertaken in their area. Several more websites allow citizens to keep track of what the government is doing in several areas and in some cases enable them to evaluate the quality of the services. This presents a considerable step toward an open and accountable government. It must be noted, however, that these e-government projects cater to a mainly urban audience and can therefore be efficient via the Internet. In rural areas with low connectivity this may be a less effective way of realizing accountability.

Another form of e-government is practiced by the Brazilian House of Representatives, which launched its e-Democracia Project in 2009.[9] Through social media and face-to-face meetings, citizens are encouraged to contribute their ideas and concerns regarding lawmaking. They are encouraged to provide information about a problem that they think needs to be regulated by law, suggest solutions, and provide input into drafting the bill.[10] Cristiano Faria, one of the implementers of this project, demonstrates actual impact of this form of citizen consultation in lawmaking: Several concerns voiced by citizens online have made it into the language of new legislation.

The government of Kenya uses text messages to provide citizens with information about their services. For instance, the Ministry of Migration provides a service through which citizens can request information about the progress of their identity card and the status of their passport by sending a text message to a specific number. The Electoral Commission of Kenya launched a voter registration service for the 2007 election through which citizens were able to register and receive verification of their registration by texting their ID number. Parents and students can access the results of the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examination by typing a code and sending it via text message to a specific number (Hellström 2010).

Election Monitoring

The group Ushahidi runs a website that was developed in Kenya to report instances of violence after the 2008 elections.[11] Ushahidi—"testimony" in Swahili—developed a mapping program that citizens can use to report any kind of incident and that is now used by many civil society groups around the world. Vote Report India, for instance, provides an online platform where citizens can report violations of the Election Commission's Model Code of Conduct.[12] Since April 2009, citizens have been able to send their reports through mobile phone text messages, via e-mail, or by entering them directly through the Internet portal. The program then accumulates all the reports on an interactive map to point to irregularities in the election process. The information gathered on the platform is available to citizens via e-mail, really simple syndication (RSS) feed, and mobile phone text messages. The same platform was used by Cuidemos el Voto Mashup to monitor the 2009 federal elections in Mexico.

Examples abound of the use of ICT to demand accountability after elections in authoritarian states, although few have systematically been gathered

and analyzed. From media reports, we know about the use of mobile phones in the demonstrations following the presidential election in Iran in June 2009. Members of the opposition, who claimed that the ruling party of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad manipulated the vote, used mobile phones to bypass the government's clampdown on information. Foreign journalists were banned from reporting on the rallies, so that only limited information about government action could reach both national and international publics.[13] One memorable moment came in the protests when pictures of the murder of a young girl, a member of the opposition, were sent from a mobile phone and reached a large international audience via the Internet as well as traditional media. Iran's government then attempted to jam satellites to prevent sensitive information from leaving the country. BBC reporter Adel Shaygan emphasized the relevance of mobile phones as one of the few if not the only means of holding the Iranian government accountable by the international community: "Video footage taken by protesters from their mobile phones has become the main source by which information has reached the outside world, through sites like YouTube."[14] About six months later, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton took up this theme in a speech on Internet freedom and ascribed mobile phones a paramount role for accountability, even raising them to a quasi-legal instrument that could indict a government: "In the demonstrations that followed Iran's presidential elections, grainy cell phone footage of a young woman's bloody murder provided a digital indictment of the government's brutality."[15]

The 2009 Iranian elections and the following protests are one of the most recent and one of the strongest examples of ICT being used by citizens to hold their government accountable and voice their grievances on an international stage. The BBC and other international news media added ICT and social media to their usual information sources. In particular, social media such as Twitter played an important role, possibly for the first time, in this particular conflict because they provided a platform for the quick and effective dissemination of information.[16] BBC editor Steve Herrmann explains the role of social media in this particular context: "Among the various impediments to reporting, there's a huge ongoing, informed and informative discussion in Iran between people who care deeply about what is happening there and who are themselves monitoring everything they can, then circulating the most useful information and links."[17] He also points out, however, that the majority of messages come from sympathizers of the opposition. The vast variety of sources and voices come in online based on merit only, and professional journalists are faced with the challenge of quality checking and editing a cacophony of information for their audiences.

Monitoring Officials

The monitoring of democratic functions is relevant outside elections. The Brazilian project Adote um Vereador (Adopt a Councilor), for instance, provides a

wiki-platform to encourage citizens to "adopt" local politicians, follow their work, and blog about their observations. The initiators of this project aim to raise political involvement outside election times and to give the electorate better control and influence over the local politicians they elect. Citizen observers of municipal councils in Colombia as well as local accountability portals in Guatemala, run by the NGO Lagún Artean, provide similar platforms.[18]

Performance Accountability

Performance accountability is mainly about the publication of independent indicators that assess the overall performance of a country with regard to a specific issue. In the context of accountability, indicators of media freedom and transparency are among the most noteworthy. The regular publication of these and other indicators is often widely covered in the press, but hardly in the press that is categorized as not free. In such circumstances, the publication of rankings online is suitable for increasing the reach of the performance assessment so that citizens in countries with restricted reporting will have a better chance of being aware of their country's performance.

Freedom House provides large information resources through their online indicators "Freedom of the World" and "Freedom of the Press."[19] Citizens can use the information provided on the methodological background of those indicators to assess the reliability and viability of the data for their own interests. They can also learn about their government's performance in comparison with other countries. Freedom House is an example where a large amount of information on the performance of a country in a specific area is available centrally and is relatively easy to use. However, this information will not reach those that do not have access to the Internet.

The Committee to Protect Journalists faces a similar problem.[20] The initiative monitors the safety of journalists worldwide and provides statistics on how many reporters are killed while doing their job, how many have been imprisoned or otherwise threatened, and how many cases are actually being investigated by the appropriate authorities. Again, the organization works with an online portal, e-mail lists, and RSS feeds—not even all journalists will be able to access information that is thus presented.

Organizations that publish general indicators on the overall performance of a country in a specific area do not seem to make use of the full spectrum of ICT yet. Possibly because of the complexity and technicality of their data, they mostly work online and rely on the mass media to pick up their stories and present them to a wider audience. Data of this kind may also be considered as being less relevant or interesting for citizens, and more relevant for an expert community, whose members usually have access to the Internet. However, I argue that a large potential exists to improve accountability by making performance indicators available through mobile ICT so that more citizens can be informed about their country's comparative performance in a specific area.

Transparency

Transparency is obviously at the heart of accountability. Citizens can hold governments accountable only if they know what the government is doing, what it is supposed to do, and what their own rights are in demanding responsiveness from officials. Typical transparency applications track budgets, independently investigate background information on political issues in countries with a repressed media system, provide information about political candidates, compare the votes of citizens with those of their elected representatives, advocate for more transparent campaign financing, and provide many more tools for increasing transparency in governments.[21]

As of September 2008, 80 countries have passed Freedom of Information Acts, and 34 more are close to passing relevant legislation. Since 2000, an average of six countries per year have passed Freedom of Information Acts (Vleugels 2008). However, access to information legislation alone is not sufficient for transparency. Citizens must know about and must exercise their rights, and governments must be able to provide information. However, many governments in developing countries do not have the capacity for gathering data that they could then publish for citizens to hold them accountable. ICT provides an infrastructure for gathering and providing information, both for the government and for citizens. ICT can foster a form of "transparency bottom up"—citizens gathering information that their governments do not have available and that can then be used both by the governments to improve services and by citizens to hold them accountable. In East Africa, the project Twaweza ("We can make it happen" in Swahili) is getting citizens involved in gathering information on water, health, and education. The project uses mobile phones because the Internet is not prevalent in the region. The information that is needed to hold governments accountable is gathered bottom-up, by those who eventually use it to hold their governments accountable. This circumvents not only government's inability to provide access to information but also its unwillingness.

Many other obstacles exist to providing transparency where ICT can—and does—provide solutions; a small number will be discussed here.[22]

Information needs organization: Information, online and offline, is often spread out over many sources. Hundreds of sources, for instance, websites, provide snippets of information. It is not feasible for citizens to find their way through the data chaos to get a more or less comprehensive picture of their government's activities. Citizens' ability to hold governments accountable would be increased if they could access, for instance, a central online data gateway that organizes information relevant to a specific issue in one place.

Global Voices is an ambitious project that provides a platform for news from all over the world.[23] Hundreds of bloggers provide this community with reports and translations of reports from blogs and citizen media from countries and sources that are not usually covered by the mainstream media. In this

sense Global Voices provides a platform for organizing information from a vast variety of sources, although reports are not limited to a single subject area.

Kubatana.net fulfills a similar function but with a different approach.[24] Established in 2001 in Zimbabwe, the portal aggregates and publishes material on human rights and other civic issues. The portal's aim is to fill information gaps between NGOs and civil society organizations in Zimbabwe and provide them with a one-stop-shop for relevant publications.[25] More than 250 member organizations of the electronic network contribute and access information relevant to their work and thereby provide a central gateway for civil society issues.

Information needs context: Mere access to information is insufficient for accountability if it is of a highly technical nature. For instance, the European Space Agency provides online information on water quality in different regions[26]—but this information alone may not be useful to fishermen who have no experience with interpreting earth observation data. For people to understand technical information, it needs to be put into context. Expert intermediaries need to explain what specific measurements and measurement units mean and provide benchmarks for people to know at what point the quality of the water becomes unacceptable.

The Swedish foundation Gapminder provides a remarkable example for this kind of intermediation and interpretation of technical data.[27] Founded by Hans Rosling, a Professor of International Health, the organization takes development data from a large number of sources and packages them in animated graphs that show complicated economic relations in a relatively simple way. This is also an example of performance accountability because development indicators are part of the vast data pool utilized by Gapminder. For example, one of Rosling's animated graphs shows the relationship between income per person and life expectancy at birth. Each country is represented by a bubble in the chart, and the size of the bubble represents the size of the population in a given country. The bubbles move along the axes of the graph as the years progress, showing how the relationship and the size of the population changes over time. This relatively simple animation puts many variables and relationships into an understandable format.

Accountability needs a Community of Practice: Both the problem of information organization and intermediation could be approached by a Community of Practice in different areas of accountability. For instance, organizations working on water quality throughout the world could provide online gateways where relevant data are organized and put into context by intermediaries. The Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) is such a Community of Practice with regard to gender issues.[28] WOUGNET, an NGO based in Kampala, combines online, offline, and mobile tools to share information, network, provide technical support to women, and advocate for gender issues. The project provides a

common platform for different efforts concerning women's rights and thereby organizes information and focuses on initiatives working toward similar goals.

Accountability needs multiple platforms: Providing data online, even on a central gateway, will still exclude most of those that need the information. The digital divide is a fact, and it does not seem likely that broadband will pervade Africa any time soon. The problem of technical reach, as discussed in the first part of this chapter, can be solved only by combining technologies that provide suitable amounts of information with those that reach large audiences even in the poorest countries. Convergence is key. Accountability therefore needs a multiplatform approach: Access to information needs to be provided through all relevant communication channels. These can include the Internet and mobile phones but will also include community radio and local multipliers such as teachers or priests.

WOUGNET utilizes online platforms, offline workshops, and cell phone applications to advocate for women's rights. In addition to its extensive online resource, Gapminder provides videos, participates in major conferences and talk shows, and utilizes the academic status of its founder to spread their message as widely as possible.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, democracy is not quite saved just yet. As I have discussed, ICT requires a strong degree of literacy with regard to technical capabilities and information selection. Mobile phones as such provide only a single point-to-point communication channel. This may strengthen everyday talk, one important source of considered public opinion, but it does not constitute a public sphere. The Internet on its own has lower potential than mobile technologies because relatively few people have access. ICT often requires costly hardware, which excludes the people from the public sphere that need it most: the poorest, the least educated, and the most remote citizens in any country.

In this chapter, I have argued that mass media have substantial deficiencies in their ability to fulfill the three main communication prerequisites for effective accountability: access to information, voice, and platforms and channels for citizen demand. Some of those deficiencies—but by no means all—can be addressed by ICT, which may provide better and more widespread access to information, a stronger voice for those outside political and economic power centers, and the infrastructure that is necessary to make this voice be heard widely.

Convergence is crucial for the effectiveness of ICT as accountability tools. The unique ability of ICT is to combine those aspects of the mass media that support accountability—for instance, the provision of large amounts

of information—with the potentially wider reach and more democratic access and usability of ICT.

Finally, I have introduced a small number of ICT projects and applications that are being used to hold governments accountable. In these particular cases, ICT is successful in fulfilling the main communication prerequisites for accountability. I identified four groups of projects that focus on different aspects of accountability: service accountability, democratic accountability, performance accountability, and transparency. Obviously, this systematization comes from a very limited study of a small number of projects. Other ICT applications will likely add other categories to this first attempt at systematizing accountability applications. I ended this chapter with a number of challenges and recommendations that may help accountability advocates and practitioners to design effective initiatives.

This chapter suffers from its limited scope and lack of systematic knowledge of the role of the mass media for accountability and the public sphere in developing countries, and from the cursory nature of the overview of actual ICT applications for accountability. However, the discussion has shown that ICT is an important addition to the public sphere that could, in convergence with traditional media, significantly increase citizens' opportunities to hold their government accountable.

On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog. ICT is not the solution to everything that is wrong with participation, governance, and accountability. I suggest, however, that these technologies give us a chance, a channel for democracy that we would otherwise not have. On the Web, it is all about efficacy and voice—in particular if you're a dog.

Notes

1. See Borins (2009); A. Kes-Erkul and R. E. Erkul, "Web 2.0 in the Process of E-Participation: The Case of Organizing for America and the Obama Administration" (2009), NCDG Working Paper no. 09–001. http://www.epractice.eu/files/Web%202.0%20in%20the%20Process%20of%20eParticipation_the%20Case%20of%20Organizing%20for%20America%20and%20the%20Obama%20Administration.pdf.
2. ITU World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database, as of July 29, 2009.
3. P. Bourdieu, "Aufruf gegen die Politik der Entpolitisierung" (2001), http://www.sozialismus-von-unten.de/archiv/text/bourdieu.htm.
4. http://transparency.globalvoicesonline.org.
5. http://www.egov4dev.org/mgovernment/resources/case/txtcsc.shtml.
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7. http://www.kiirti.org.
8. http://transparency.globalvoicesonline.org.
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11. http://www.ushahidi.com.

12. http://votereport.in/blog/press-room/press-release.
13. Huria Choudhari on bbc.com, September 8, 2009, http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/worldagenda/2009/09/090908_worldagenda_iran_2.shtml.
14. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/click_online/8120858.stm.
15. http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm.
16. http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm.
17. http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2009/06/social_media_in_iran.html.
18. http://transparency.globalvoicesonline.org.
19. http://www.freedomhouse.org.
20. http://www.cpj.org.
21. http://opengovernance.info/BTKenya, http://inmediahk.net, http://www.votainteligente.cl, http://www.votenaweb.com.br, and http://kepmutatas.hu/english, respectively. The examples listed in this paragraph come from Technology for Transparency Project (2010).
22. These recommendations are inspired by a lively discussion at the Global Voices Citizen Media Summit 2010 in Santiago, Chile, where I had the honor of moderating a discussion on ICT for accountability. The points listed here are the outcome of this discussion, and I am very grateful for the members of this particular panel for their input and inspiring ideas.
23. http://globalvoicesonline.org.
24. http://www.kubatana.net.
25. http://transparency.globalvoicesonline.org.
26. http://www.esa.int/esaLP/SEMO711YUFF_LPgmes_0.html.
27. http://www.gapminder.org.
28. http://www.wougnet.org.

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