E-GOVERNANCE AND E-DEMOCRACY: YES AND NO (T QUITE)

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If there is one thing the generation today is most familiar with, that is the internet. Claim has it that the use of internet in our daily lives today is no longer just recreational, but a necessity. We use the internet for communication, even for events which are classified as “formal” — sending e-mails to our professors, setting appointments with our interviewees, gathering data for a specific survey, conducting a poll over a certain issue, etc. And, in today’s context — where a pandemic is currently unfurling, this is even more amplified. With this, the ‘reinventing’ of local governance through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has become a pressing issue.

According to Alampay (2015), there is a need to ‘interrogate’ said role of the ICT in governance. Primary concern is how the role of basic telecommunication has changed through the past years, and how the people’s participation has changed with it.

First, a lot has changed in the way, and the medium, the people participate at the local government level. At the outset, there is a shift of the ‘locus of engagement,’ from Web 1.0 which are the websites, to Web 2.0 which are the social media — Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. Along with this, there comes two emerging issues — (1) the changing ‘concept of access,’ and (2) the emerging support for ‘open data,’ (vis-à-vis open information).

Now then, all these three issues can be covered when we talk about the Web 2.0 (the social media) as an ‘interactive’ space. It is interactive, since people can voice out directly what they have to say. The communication is two-way, as compared to the old
websites form (Web 1.0) which simply relays hard information to its viewers. Interestingly, the problem of ‘bashers’ and ‘trolls’ get in the way. Since the internet — the social media in particular — is an ‘uncontrolled’ and ‘unregulated’ space, there is a very high tendency for the people to ‘strike hard’ and/or ‘strike illogically.’ Alampay (2015), however, made a clear stand on what to do with them. For him, they are part of democracy. In other words, we won’t want to end up censoring our information just so we won’t get negative comments. Which is why, true participative and democratic e-local governance is about ‘surrendering privacy.’

Second, the concept of ‘open government’ and ‘open data’ are both ideal, but to some extent are not feasible. Open government, defined as “the governing doctrine which holds that citizens have the right access the documents and proceedings of the government to allow for effective public oversight” has five components — (1) government transparency (transparency in procedures, tasks, operations, and regulations), (2) data transparency (authenticity, understandability, and reusability), (3) participation through open dialogue, (4) collaboration (government to government, government to citizens, and government to business), and (5) open data. Open data, meanwhile, is the “non-privacy-restricted and non-confidential data which is produced with public money and is made available without any restrictions on its usage and distribution.” One indicator that the data is “open” is when it is in its rawest form. For example, documents must not be in a Portable Document Format (PDF) which is non-editable. The people must be able to modify them, and make something from them.

Interestingly, the problem with these two still rests on the ability of people to ‘access.’ In fact, one skepticism about the ICT is that it only all too often reproduces what exists. Inequalities happening in the real world; power relations, power schemes, power imbalances, etc. are just replicated. In other words, there is a ‘digital divide’ or ‘information divide,’ simply because there are people without internet connection. Or, there are people who do have them, but do not know how to use them.
Third, it is important to note that exercising e-governance is required in exercising e-democracy. E-governance, being the larger concept of the two, is divided into two general areas: electronic government and electronic democracy. Electronic government, by explanation, is the use of technology within the routine of activities, citizens engagement, and consultation. E-democracy, as the more specific idea, generally focus on “amplifying” the voice of citizens by making the information available, which is encouraged through participation. In other words, e-government is administrative, while e-democracy is political.

Now, if we are to evaluate these two in the context of today, we can say that yes, we are towards e-government. That is, improving the way we do government, which is mostly just about efficiency. But with the way citizens engage with the government, not so.

Our local governments are working toward e-government, but not really toward e-democracy. Indeed, to simply govern is relatively easy, but to govern by the principles of democracy is hard.

References: