

WHEN DIGITAL DEMOCRACY FALLS SHORT: INSIGHTS FROM COLOMBIA



RESEARCH BRIEF

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1. Colombian e-government at crossroads

Dramatic political events have marked the global context since we began our research on ICT-mediated governance and transformative citizenship in Colombia in May 2016. The Brexit referendum, which resulted in the separation of the UK from the European Union, the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, the victory of Donald Trump in the US Presidential election after a toxic campaign, and the vote for 'No' in the Colombian peace plebiscite, which would have ended 70 years of conflict between the government and the FARC guerillas. All of these situations had two elements in common: first, they dealt with power and governance, and second, they were heavily mediated through ICTs.

While governance has changed dramatically with ICTs, so has politics. It has evolved from an ideological-and-dialogical debate to a more psychological-and-emotional exercise. Countries have embraced the application of ICTs to governance, looking for more transparent and efficient political systems. The global discourse of e-governance tends to associate transparency and efficiency with citizen engagement (Van Der Meer, Gelders, & Rotthier, 2014)¹. However, we know now that these elements are necessary but not sufficient to enhance democracy. Cognitive, behavioural, organisational, political and cultural changes must be articulated along with information systems to produce changes towards democratisation (Criado & Gil-García, 2013)². ICT-mediated democracy, or so called e-democracy, has made gains in people's engagement only up to the level where the social contradictions of its context allow it to grow. Historical and contextual particularities in each country determine to what extent democracy can positively reformulate engagement, transparency and accountability, or create democratic divides (Norris, 2000, 2001)³ that imply higher concentration of power and political exclusion.

Governance routines, whether physical or electronic, impact citizen perception and representation of the government (the political power structure) and public governance itself (the formal exercise of power). These representations are anchored to historical events and traditional exercise of authority, so new occurrences like e-government policies may be misunderstood as well as misused by citizens and government alike. For example, e-government can become a tool of authoritarian governance, whereas citizens may also avoid participation in e-consultations. This situation is acute in developing countries, where policy implementation is a complex and slow social process of unstable behaviour (Medellín Torres, 2004)⁴. In the case of Colombia, it must be remembered that the e-government wave reached the country in two distinct moments: the first one in year 2000, triggered by the US Clinton-Gore presidency, with the participation of the G7, OECD, ITU and finally the UN. The second wave was stimulated by the Obama mandate in the US in year 2010, with the collaboration of the UN and the Allianz for Open Government (AGA, 2013; Berrío-Zapata, 2015)⁵. For developing countries like Colombia, the first wave demanded a serious

1 Van Der Meer, T. G. L. A., Gelders, D., & Rotthier, S. (2014). E-democracy: exploring the current stage of e-government. *Journal of Information Policy*, 4, 489–506.

2 Criado, J. I., & Gil-García, J. R. (2013). Gobierno electrónico, gestión y políticas públicas: Estado actual y tendencias futuras en América Latina. *Gestión y política pública*, 22(SPE), 03-48.

3 Norris, P. (2000). Democratic divide: The impact of the internet on parliaments worldwide. Apresentado em American Political Science Association annual meeting, Washington DC. Recuperado de <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/apsa2000demdiv.pdf>

Norris, P. (2001). *Digital divide: Civic engagement, information poverty, and the Internet worldwide*. Cambridge University Press.

4 Medellín Torres, P. (2004). *La política de las políticas públicas: propuesta teórica y metodológica para el estudio de las políticas públicas en países de frágil institucionalidad (Proyecto "Política y políticas públicas en los procesos de reformas en América Latina. Similitudes y Diversidades"* (Proyecto FRA/02/073) No. 9213225644). Santiago de Chile,: Naciones Unidas, CEPAL.

5 AGA. (2013). *Informe de Avance de Colombia*. Bogotá: Alianza para el Gobierno Abierto AGA.

updating of ICT infrastructure for the government, the development of interoperability and the creation of ICT-mediated bureaucratic services (Berrío-Zapata & Rojas, 2014; Massal & Sandoval, 2010)⁶. This took place in Colombia under the *Agenda de Conectividad* policy from 2000 to 2010, supported by presidents Pastrana and Uribe. The second wave began in 2011 when president Santos joined the Open Government Partnership, and passed a law for Transparency and Access to Public Information. This second wave is ongoing and is about democratic enhancement and citizen engagement (Berrío-Zapata & Berrío-Gil, 2017)⁷.

Our research in Colombia focused on identifying the impact of ICT mediation in democratisation and citizen engagement in terms of what is understood as governance, how those representations are legitimised, and the ways in which they change power relations. We wanted to confirm if such changes have produced democratisation in governance and political routines. To do so, historical trends, statistical facts, social and e-readiness indicators were examined to understand the political and socio-technical context of the country.

We reviewed Colombian ICT mediation policies, placed them in relation to the context, and contrasted them with previous research about local e-democracy developments. We also interviewed government and civil society actors. This gave us a characterisation of how electronic governance routines have evolved and produced a particular flavour of ICT-mediated governance structure, namely Colombian e-government.

Let us first situate the political context of Colombia. The history of the country is full of wars and secessions. Although the country has a long republican tradition based on popular elections, violence has been omnipresent, mainly in rural areas and small cities. Democracy exists without solving contradictions in a democratic way (Posada-Carbó, 1996)⁸. The dominant conservative parties systematically excluded popular movements from governance.

As Colombia is not a developed country, poverty and social exclusion took the form of organised crime and insurgency. In the early 20th century, gangs of landless peasants called *Bandoleros* tried to balance the power of *latifundists*⁹ and death-squads from the traditional parties. After 1960, these gangs transformed into leftist guerrillas (Figueroa, 1998; González, 1998)¹⁰. Between 1970 and 1990, smugglers and petty criminals found their way up the ladder in society, becoming drug-lords and cartels (Perea, 2009)¹¹. On the other side, *latifundists* and traditional elites transformed their death-squads into paramilitary right-wing armies. Violent confrontation is the first characteristic of the Colombian political context. Violence and corruption in politics destroy trust. In developed countries, political scandals have created a crisis of trust in democracies, as traditional parties are not perceived as true representatives of the people any more (Åström, Jonsson,

Berrío-Zapata, C. (2015). *Tecnología da Informação, Discurso e Poder: Análise de Domínio a partir do conceito de Exclusão Digital na perspectiva da Teoria Centro-Periferia*. (Phd). Universidade Estadual Paulista "Júlio de Mesquita Filho" UNESP, Marília.

6 Berrío-Zapata, C., & Rojas, H. (2014). La brecha digital universitaria: La apropiación de las TIC en estudiantes de educación superior en Bogotá (Colombia). *Comunicar*, 22(43), 133–142. <https://doi.org/10.3916/C43-2014-13>

Massal, J., & Sandoval, C. G. (2010). Gobierno electrónico. ¿estado, ciudadanía y democracia en internet? *Análisis político*, 23(68), 3–25.

7 Berrío-Zapata, C., & Berrío-Gil, D. S. (2017). *State of the Art: Colombia (State of the Art)*. Bagalore: ITFC, MAVC, UFPA.

8 Posada-Carbó, E. (1996). *Elections before democracy: the History of Elections in Europe and Latin America*. London: McMillan Press Ltd.

9 Traditional land owners

10 Figueroa, H. (1998). Los Chulavistas y sus tradiciones militaristas conservadoras. *Goliardos. Revista de Investigaciones Históricas*, (6), 20–32.

González, F. (1998). *Las guerras civiles desde 1830 y su proyección en el siglo XX*. Bogotá: Museo Nacional de Colombia.

11 Perea, C. M. (2009). Colonización en armas y narcotráfico. La violencia en Colombia durante el siglo XX. *Araucaria. Revista Iberoamericana de Filosofía, Política y Humanidades*, II semestre 2009(22), 99–124.

Hinsberg, & Karlsson, 2013)¹². In Colombia, this crisis was boosted by the coexistence of a democratic regime with an undercover war. Dirty war combined with corruption, power and concentration of wealth, lack of education, poor monitoring infrastructure and penetration of drug cartels into politics and public offices has institutionalised distrust in politics and state actors. Though democracy is cherished by the people, the Colombian political context is marked by a total distrust in the government and the politicians (DANE, 2011, 2013)¹³.

ICT tools and services such as broadband are a luxury (WB, 2016c, 2016b, 2016a)¹⁴. Information infrastructure, though widely improved in recent years, are still insufficient. Education levels are insufficient to meet the necessities of the information society (UNDP, 2016)¹⁵. As a result, Colombia suffers from an access divide due to economic and infrastructural limitations, and a second level digital divide because of weak information and data literacy.

Nonetheless, Colombian e-government development has been internationally recognised by the UN as a leader in Latin America, and one of the 20 most developed nations of the world in the area (UN, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016)¹⁶. This apparent contradiction between the socio-political context with what e-readiness statistics say about Colombian e-government, as well as the fact that e-government research in Colombia is scarce, constitute an important point of departure for this research about ICT mediation and democratic engagement.

“In the old DAS (Administrative Department of Security), data was collected from all of the NGOs that were considered as political arms of subversion; sociology professors, political science teachers. This information passed on to the paramilitaries and the paramilitaries then killed professor Andres...”

-Interview for the case study (Berrío-Zapata & Berrío-Gil, 2017).

We analysed the government project called “Crystal Urn” (*Urna de Cristal*), which is the centrepiece of President Santos’ mandate on e-government policy and democratisation. E-government for democratic engagement is a recent phenomenon in the country. Colombia’s first Open Government Plan was produced in 2012 (*Comité de Seguimiento AGA Colombia*, 2015)¹⁷, and *Urna de Cristal* (UDC) initiated online consultations in 2013 (*Urna de Cristal*, 2017)¹⁸. Three

12 Åström, J., Jonsson, M., Hinsberg, H., & Karlsson, M. (2013). *Case studies on e-participation policy: Sweden, Estonia and Iceland*. Tallinn.

13 DANE. (2011). *Encuesta de Cultura Política* (No. Año 2008). Bogotá. Recuperado de http://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/ecpolitica/bol_ECP_15.pdf

DANE. (2013). *Encuesta de Cultura Política* (No. Año 2008). Bogotá. Recuperado de http://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/ecpolitica/bol_ECP_15.pdf

14 WB. (2016a). Colombia Data (World Bank). Recuperado 1o de setembre de 2016, de <http://data.worldbank.org/country/colombia>

WB. (2016b). GINI index (World Bank estimate). Recuperado 1o de setembre de 2016, de <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>

WB. (2016c). Poverty Overview: Poverty & Equity. Recuperado 1o de setembre de 2016, de <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/home/>

15 UNDP. (2016). *Human Development Reports* (Human Development Index No. 1995–2015). New York: United Nations. Recuperado de <http://hdr.undp.org/es>

16 UN. (2004). *UN Global E-Government survey*. New York: UNPACS.

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UN. (2012). *UN Global E-Government survey*. New York: UNPACS.

UN. (2014). *UN Global E-Government survey*. New York: UNPACS.

17 Comité de Seguimiento AGA Colombia. Alianza para el Gobierno Abierto, II Plan de Acción 2015 -2017 Colombia, Gobierno Abierto para la Inclusión Social y Territorial (2015).

18 Urna de Cristal. (2017). Ejercicios de Participación. Recuperado 18 de abril de 2017, de <http://www.urnadecristal.gov.co/ejercicios-gobierno?page=15>

previous studies have been produced by the government on this project (Colombia, 2015; Datexco, 2012; Infométrika, 2013)¹⁹ and one by the Uppsala University (Parra Beltran, 2015)²⁰. One key observation of these studies was that ICTs are used by citizens mainly for entertainment and recreation and not for political interaction. The studies also concluded that e-government enabled new forms of efficient interaction with the state in the bureaucratic area, but it did not empower citizens and officers due to their low political awareness (the notions of “participatory government” and “digital participation culture” were not understood), the digital divide, and the lack of credibility of the government. Further, e-government was associated with bureaucratic processes and social control, with citizens apprehensive about misuse of private data for retaliation.

For the case study of UDC (Berrío-Zapata & Berrío-Gil, 2017)²¹, we conducted in-depth interviews with relevant actors – UDC officers, the army, the National Parks Authority, and four NGOs dealing with health, free press and expression, civil rights and electronic government. The interviews were subjected to content analysis (Bardin, 2002)²² using categories taken from Giddens' structuration framework (Giddens, 1984)²³.

We identified the following common issues from our analysis of the interviews;

- Corruption and a tendency for opportunism in the political class.
- Low consumption of e-goods due to inequality, technological dependency and currency exchange disadvantages.
- Poor educational quality, absence of political consciousness, a consumerist perspective of citizenship, and citizen indifference towards digital participation.
- Lack of knowledge about the government and its bureaucratic processes, absence of information about digital democratic participation, and lack of competencies for critical informational action.
- Distrust towards the government, lack of public awareness about e-government and democratic engagement.
- Oversimplification of democratic deliberation.
- Lack of knowledge about users, arrogance and lack of competence of the government.

The positive elements identified were;

- A positive attitude towards ICT policies.
- Technology perceived as a propeller of positive social changes in political participation.
- The recognition of the government's efforts and social achievements in digitisation.

19 Colombia. (2015). Estos son los resultados de nuestros ejercicios de participación. Recuperado 15 de setiembre de 2016, de <http://www.urnadecristal.gov.co/gestion-gobierno/participacion-ciudadana-colombia-resultados>

Datexco. (2012). *Estudio de Percepción Servicio Urna de Cristal, Julio de 2012*. Bogotá: Datexco.

Infométrika. (2013). *Estudio de Percepción Ciudadana de la Iniciativa Urna de Cristal - Ciudadanos, Instituciones y Gobierno* (No. CONTRATO N° 000783). Bogotá. Recuperado de http://estrategia.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co/623/articles-7913_urna2_2013.pdf

20 Parra Beltran, S. (2015). *Government Driven e-participation: The Case of" Urna de Cristal in the Colombian Context* (MA). Uppsala University, Uppsala.

21 See 7 above.

22 Bardin, L. (2002). *Análisis de contenido*. Madrid: Ediciones Akal.

23 Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. University of California Press.

2. As an unfinished conclusion...

The context of a knowledge society is vital for e-government democratisation and e-democracy (Norris, 2005)²⁴. However, the basic conditions of an information society, that can support e-government, fails in developing countries (Arboleda, 2006)²⁵. Castells noted that the information age would be capable of major achievements but could also enforce gigantic inequities. He pointed that with regard to Latin America, the main problem would be the need to simultaneously solve old and new problems (Castells, 1997)²⁶. The Colombian legacy of political violence, corruption and elites who perpetuate the concentration of wealth and power are “old problems” that remain present, and affect the construction of e-government and e-democracy. Corruption and violence have fed the economic and political exclusion of vast populations, fuelling a state of war for 70 years. Political trust and cooperative relations were seriously damaged, and the lack of quality in education favoured political apathy, non-critical use of technology, and absence of informational-data competencies. These conditions have been improving, but at a very slow pace.

“In spite of what one might think, people are permanently connected to the Internet; they have a close relationship with social networks that generates interest groups. But what they do is clicktivism i.e. “I do not like this”, “I do not agree”. Beyond that, opinion and participation are very shallow.”

- Interview for the case study (Berrío-Zapata & Berrío-Gil, 2017).

The same problems that affect the appropriation of ICTs in the population limit the action of governmental officers, as the state is not monolithic. Public agencies that are distant from main cities or the centers of power have problems related to access. Another ‘old’ problem is associating democracy with a voting system to elect autonomous representatives, and not a structure of co-governance that can bring citizens and public officers together. The political culture personalises governance and promotes a vassal relationship, not a democratic engagement.

The ‘new’ problems are the banalisation of the political debate, and the strong emotional manipulation that social networks are facilitating. This is a worldwide tendency as discussed at the beginning of this report, and it is leading us

to political polarisation. The recent Colombian plebiscite to support the peace treaty with FARC was an example of manipulation of the masses through disinformation, keeping the real debate closed.

Democratisation through ICT mediation will not be easy in Colombia, and the first step is to understand that technology will be a reflection of the country’s reality, and not a miraculous solution. Empirical research can throw light on the particularities of e-government and e-democratisation in different contexts. In the case of Colombia, we identified at least four areas for improvement:

1. *Information and data literacies*: While changes to the overall education system are vital to building competencies of citizens, an immediate step can be taken to provide training to community leaders on the basics of data and information literacy. Community leaders must also fully understand how data and information are linked to democratisation. We have made some proposals in this area.

2. *Political literacy*: Studies about political behaviour in Colombia have identified a frail

24 Norris, P. (2000). *Democratic divide: The impact of the internet on parliaments worldwide*. Apresentado em American Political Science Association annual meeting, Washington DC. Recuperado de <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/apsa2000demdiv.pdf>

25 Arboleda, P. B. (2006). *Information and Communication Technology Appropriation: ECUADOR* (Phd). University of Bergen, Department of Information Science and Media Studies, Bergen.

26 Castells, M. (1997). Globalización, sociedad y política en la era de la información. *Análisis Político*, mayo-agosto de 1999(37), 8–18.

political socialisation (Rojas, 2009)²⁷. In an era when supporting social causes is easily confused with “communism”, political literacy (the set of abilities necessary to participate in a society's governance, the ability to read issues and events politically, political awareness and effectiveness) is basic. Mass media campaigns and community-based outreach by NGOs about e-democracy will be useful. Campaigns on social networks may also be effective. (For instance, the Facebook campaign to teach users how to recognise fake news, launched in April of 2017 (Thomas, 2017)²⁸).

3. *Nurturing leaders at the grassroots*: Not everyone with the necessary knowledge to take advantage of ICTs will have an interest to participate in the political project for democratisation. Traditional leaders must be introduced to the virtual arena of e-governance, and those digitally competent should be motivated to work for democratisation.

4. *Redirecting e-democracy to social technologies*: Developing engagement tools for e-democracy on mobile based platforms will have a massive impact. An example of this is the software app used by taxi drivers in Bogotá, that not only serves as a GPS and passenger link, but is also used collaboratively to solve doubts, share information, monitor security risk, and coordinate actions over cheap tablets and smart phones.

This research also identified a promising change in the thought process of government officers, NGO leaders and research institutes. The Colombian government's sustained efforts to develop e-government during the past three presidential administrations has reflected positively in e-readiness indicators as well. But the country's political legacy and new social contradictions derived from ICTs need to be tackled. New generations seem much more capable of achieving enhancements in democratisation and citizen engagement than their predecessors, but more empirical research and action-research is required.

27 Rojas, H. & P.-A., E. (2009). Mobilizers mobilized: Information, expression, mobilization and participation in the digital age. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 14(4), 902–927.

28 Thomas, D. (2017). BBC News. Recuperado 19 de abril de 2017, de <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-39517033>

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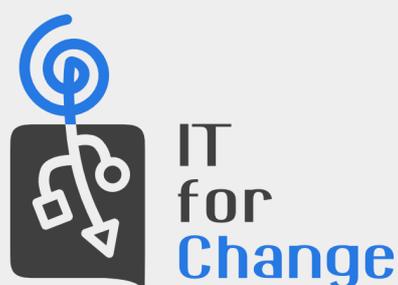
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A GRAND CHALLENGE
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