



Diciembre 2004
Enero 2005

E-Ljubljana: New Space for Active Political Participation

Número Actual

Número Actual

Números Anteriores

Editorial

Sitios de

Novedades

Ediciones Especiales



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Número 42

Abstract:

The article analyses the current state of informatization of the residents of the City of Ljubljana and their readiness to work and live in a Virtual Ljubljana. Special emphasis is placed on their willingness to take advantage of the democratic potential that the Internet offers as a means of active integration in the political participation at the local city level.

It has been concluded that virtual city democracies can also serve as a new platform for affirming the legitimacy of spatial planning, facilitating communication between the city administration and the manifest (self)organised groups of people, the public and especially, the non-manifest and often excluded and unidentified groups of residents. Yet at the current level of informatization in the City of Ljubljana, this new area of political participation remains an unused opportunity, even though informationalized groups of residents have expressed the desire to become an active part of the local virtual democracy. In the particular example of the City of Ljubljana, the issue of the digital divide remains unresolved, which is not surprising considering the poor development of policies aimed at overcoming the informational exclusion at the city level.

Introduction

Throughout history, forums for informal communication have played a crucial role in the creation of public opinion, thereby paving the way for the creation of contemporary civil society. These physical spaces are now moving to cyberspace, where people exchange opinions on pressing issues and thus create public opinion that affects the formation and implementation of policies on local and global levels. This has spurred the theoreticians of democracy to start talking about the return to direct (only this time "virtual") Athens-style democracy.

In response, local authorities have started constructing portals, "electronic city halls", which each week highlight a new topic of interest to residents, presenting it in minute detail on the website. Residents can send their opinions and commentaries, which can serve as a basis for the acceptance and legitimacy of new decisions made by local authorities. Such portals (Tambini, 1998) have been referred to as teledemocracy, technopolitics, new media or electronic democracy. What all these expressions have in common is that they suggest a new political era of unlimited communication between citizens and the authorities. The idea of electronic democracy has generally been ushered in by promises of more democratic, accessible and open policies, where politicians and citizens can work together. Oblak (2001) stresses that the adjective "electronic" in this context refers to the use and expansion of digital, computer and communication technologies that support and enable the acquisition of new information and the creation and use of various communication channels.

Taking these trends as a starting point, the article analyses how well Ljubljana residents are currently equipped with new information and communication technologies, and how willing

they are to work and live in the Virtual Ljubljana. Most notably, I was interested in the extent to which people are willing to take advantage of the democratic potential provided by the Internet and – by using the new cyberspace for social actions – participate actively in politics on the local city level.

General conclusions that

- New information and telecommunication technologies make it easier for people to conduct a dialogue with city authorities in a way that makes them feel connected with, and co-responsible for, the development of the society,
- The interactivity of new forms of telecommunication makes it possible to increase the number of those participating in processes of democratic decision-making,
- Intermediate levels that filter information are no longer required,
- Cyberspace is an excellent mechanism for discussions about new development plans, are examined in this article using the example of preparations for a new spatial plan for the City of Ljubljana. It is assumed that virtual city democracies can also represent new sources of legitimacy for spatial planning, provided there is mutual communication between the city authorities and their various departments and the manifestly (self)organised groups of people, different segments of the public and especially, non-manifest and often excluded and non-identified groups of residents.

The Internet as a New Source of Legitimacy for Spatial Planning – Questionnaire Survey

Working together with the Department of Spatial Planning of the City of Ljubljana, we drafted a questionnaire for the first phase of the survey (a telephone survey), designed to determine the current level of informatization among Ljubljana residents, the reasons for the lack thereof and the residents' willingness to take an active part in discussions on new spatial development plans unveiled by the City of Ljubljana.

The second phase of the project *Virtual Ljubljana: Political Participation and Overcoming the Information Exclusion – Guidelines and Activities for Introducing Local Virtual Democracy*, was a telephone survey on opportunities that cyberspace offers as a new platform for debates on development and spatial-development policies. The survey focussed on three main areas:

- The actual level of informatization – determining how well city residents are equipped with new information and telecommunication technologies;
- The degree to which residents are acquainted with the preparation of a new spatial plan for the City of Ljubljana and their willingness to participate in discussions on the new spatial plan;
- The residents' interests in political participation and the potential of using cyberspace to promote more active participation in debates on the city's development policies.

Below is the analysis of results by individual areas and a final analysis with guidelines for further planning of programmes for public participation in making spatial development policies.

Information Technology Equipment of the Residents of the City of Ljubljana

The analysis of how well residents are equipped with information and telecommunication technologies (ICT), and the use of publicly accessible information with the help of ICT, confirmed what similar surveys conducted as part of the comprehensive *Use of the Internet in Slovenia* study revealed: residents of Ljubljana are much better informationalized than Slovenians overall.

Table 1: Information technology equipment and the frequency of use of telecommunication technologies among residents of Ljubljana

	Daily	Weekly	Occasionally	Do not have / Do not use	Have but do not use
Mobile phone	74.9%	2.5%	4.9%	17%	0.6%
PC	38.4%	9.5%	10.5%	35.4%	6.3%
Laptop computer	6.9%	1.8%	3.3%	86.7%	1.3%
Internet	26.5%	7.9%	9%	51.7%	4.9%
Fax	11.1%	5.3%	9.4%	73.2%	1%
SMS INFO	15.1%	11.6%	19.8%	53.5%	----
ATM	14.4%	50.1%	20.3%	15.2%	0%
Internet banking	5.2%	6.5%	7.9%	80.5%	0%
Public info terminals	0.5%	2.9%	31.4%	65.2%	----
Internal info terminals	2.1%	12.6%	40.4%	44.9%	----
Teletext	28.3%	17.6%	26.7%	27.4%	0%

Only 17% of the respondents do not have a mobile phone and merely 35.4% do not have a personal computer in their household. Respondents were also questioned about how frequently they use ICT that they own or that are available at (semi)public places. Results are shown in the table above. In addition to the daily use of mobile phones, the relatively high daily use of personal computers and teletext is especially notable. The results also suggest that information terminals have failed to live up to their designated role, the most probable reason being that the information they provide is often outdated, while terminals also break down frequently (for example the one located on Mackova Street). It is also interesting that almost 5% of those who have Internet access do not use it.

The analysis of the demographics of frequent users of ICT technologies and services suggests that the digital divide is still a problem in the City of Ljubljana. The division into informationalized and the informationally-excluded persists, following the structural characteristics of marginalized groups in urban areas, which are typical in other areas as well. Those with higher education, younger people and two-thirds of men are better informationalized. Even mobile telephony, which has the highest penetration, is a telling example: women without a mobile phone outnumber men two to one. The ratio is almost identical for personal computers.

Most international surveys examining the digital divide have pinpointed education as the key structural characteristic that separates informationalized and non-informationalized population groups. That education is the decisive factor has also been proved by our survey: as much as 73.6 percent of the respondents with vocational education or less do not have a personal computer. This share drops to 34.7 percent among the group with secondary school education, while only 12.5 percent of those with higher education do not have a personal computer in their household. Only about a fourth (25.4%) of those with higher education do not have Internet access, but the number soars to 87.3% among those with poorer education (finished vocational school or less).

The differences are similar in the use of information services. As many as a third of those with the lowest education, for example, do not even use automatic teller machines. Internet banking is a service only used by those with the highest education, but even here it is still poorly developed. Results on the use of public information terminals confirm fears that this is a "public service" which people indeed use in small numbers. Users of information terminals are mostly well-educated people who are often in areas where these terminals are located, which confirms findings that groups marginalized in terms of education and, consequently, income, are on the margins of urban activities even in spatial

terms. Since these population groups do not often use ICT at work, neither do they frequent libraries, e-points and public institutions, most policies aimed at bridging the digital divide are mistargetted due to the failure to take into consideration their temporal and spatial movements. This should be an issue of concern for planners of future public terminals, the so-called e-points, who should take this conclusion into consideration and create policies for the promotion of informatization in the City of Ljubljana on a borough-based approach. This concept was the cornerstone measure for incorporating informationally marginalized population groups in the US, as laid out in the Second Programme for the Development of National Information Infrastructure (NII II). If e-points were set up in the borough of Rakova Jelša or the old part of Štepanjsko naselje, the long-term effects of improving digital literacy would arguably be significantly better than with current informationalization policies.

In addition to education, a crucial factor determining the placement of residents into the informationalized group is age. Mobile telephony, Internet, SMS, Internet banking and information terminals are mostly used by those under 25. In the use of personal computers, they are often joined by the 25-40 age group. The info-urban city population is thus made up of younger, school-going users, as well as those with higher education that are not older than 40. This is a typical demographic structure of the early adopters of information technologies which, in Slovenia as well as elsewhere, is only slowly transforming into a demographically more diverse user structure.

What Do Users Do on the Internet?

In the segment on the informatization of the residents, we also included a set of questions aimed at obtaining information on the daily use and opportunities offered by the Internet. The questions were answered by 191 respondents who qualified as Internet users.

Half of those polled use the Internet *several times a day*, 16.4% use it *almost every day*, 22% *several times a week*, while the remaining 9.5 percent use it only *a few times a month*. If we define regular users as those who use the Internet at least several times a week, the conclusion is that the majority of the Ljubljana Internet population are regular users, as they account for 89.6 percent of all Internet users.

More problematic from the developmental point of view are the results of the analysis on the use of the Internet, which are given in the subsequent table divided into specific uses and frequency of use. Considering the fact that nine-tenths of those included in this part of the survey are regular users, it is surprising how low the shares are for daily and weekly use in several categories provided by the Internet.

A more detailed analysis was conducted to determine what the actual uses are in relation to mere frequency of presence in cyberspace. Users were divided into those who use the internet *several times a day*, *almost every day* and *several times a week*, and others who use it less often. The analysis has established that users who use the Internet several times a day to search for work-related information, stand out in terms of how frequently they search for information/content (52.6%). Also represented in this group are all daily telecommuters included in the survey (24.5% of them work from home daily).

Regular users also frequently search for entertainment, education and hobby-related information on the Internet. Younger Internet users are the most likely to use the Internet for entertainment, while users in the 40-55 age group are least likely to do so.

Only one quarter of Internet users use the Internet for shopping at domestic or foreign online stores. Regular users – those who use the Internet several times a day – also represent the majority of online shoppers in the City of Ljubljana. Only about a

quarter of the users, meanwhile, use the opportunity to reserve tickets online.

Table 2: Frequency of daily Internet use for specific purposes

	Daily	Weekly	Occasionally	Never
Searching for work-related information	33.7 %	26.2 %	28.4 %	11.7 %
Entertainment	17.9 %	18.4 %	33.2 %	30.4 %
Education	14.8 %	21.4 %	42.3 %	21.5 %
Telecommuting	12.7 %	8.4 %	18.4 %	60.4 %
Getting information on society and politics	11.4 %	10.2 %	26.4 %	52 %
Searching for information on cultural and sports events	9.5 %	22.8 %	46.8 %	20.9 %
Searching for information on hobbies	7.6 %	26.9 %	39.8 %	25.7 %
Checking TV schedule	6.7 %	10.3 %	28.5 %	54.5 %
Taking part in forums	3.7 %	3.2 %	12.3 %	80.9 %
Listening to radio, concerts	1.7 %	5.7 %	16.2 %	76.5 %
Getting shopping information	1.7 %	13.5 %	36.2 %	48.5 %
Searching for tourist information	0.2 %	12.4 %	71.8 %	15.6 %
Shopping in Slovenia	0 %	0.9 %	15.8 %	83.3 %
Shopping abroad	0 %	1.6 %	16.6 %	81.9 %
Reserving tickets	0 %	3.6 %	27.6 %	68.8 %

A crucial piece of information for the development of virtual democracy is that the most frequent Internet users are those who take part in forums and often obtain information on politics and social affairs online. Interestingly, the share of men interested in politics is significantly higher than the share of women (56.9% of women never search for information on politics, as opposed to only 46.4 percent of men). The oldest population (over 55) is the most interested in political subjects, while the youngest, "Internet population", is least interested. It is this "lack of interest" in politics as manifest in the young population that could present a challenge for creators of the virtual democracy portal: they should consider creating interesting political and development content on youth issues, which are usually pushed to the margins of development policies.

Data on the specific use of the Internet are worrisome from the developmental point of view, illustrating a distinct lack of interesting and useful content in Slovenian cyberspace. Although data suggests a significant level of informatization, this is only to a minor extent reflected in lifestyle changes. The younger and better educated do use cyberspace as an arena of daily life and work, but younger users use it mostly for entertainment, while the cross-section of all age groups of (regular) users reveals the Internet mostly as a tool for searching for information. There is very little virtualised consumption in domestic cyberspace. What is worse, the current state of Internet content in the City of Ljubljana hardly enables the emergence of virtual democracy.

Willingness of Residents to Participate in Politics – Possibilities for the Development of a (Local) Virtual Democracy

Debates on the emergence, development and downfall of digital cities often touch on the commercialisation and profanity of projects that started out with the best of intentions (See Lenarcic, 2002). Yet this criticism, coming from disappointed early planners, is often merely a consequence of their weak social empathy. Numerous early examples of virtual democracies were designed with a view to including broad groups of residents in debates on development policies. Yet in practice, it has turned out that users often started using the new, often freely accessible, interaction space for other forms of interaction more

closely related to their personal interests, ranging from leisure to sex and professional interests.

We believe that, although not envisaged by the designers, such use of digital cities is by no means "irregular, wrong or forbidden". It is simply the result of the fact that some users have taken advantage of the new arena of association to create and develop more or less stable interest groups. Yet through the debate forums, these groups have often informally discussed issues relevant to the development of cities, and sometimes arrived at possible solutions. The anonymity of the debate forums often promoted the participation of marginalized groups and individuals, who dared speak up about their specific problems. At the same time, they demystified and destigmatized what had been foreign and unfamiliar to the majority mainstream population. Occasionally, these interest cyberforums evolved into pressure groups which achieved a solution to concrete problems at the city level. Unfortunately, it also happened that these forums died out after the problems were resolved.

The question "What do you think about politicians communicating with the public via the Internet? Should city politicians and administrators follow their example?" reveals that as many as 54% of those polled would like a system enabling "direct communication of the residents with them". Interestingly, two-thirds of Internet users search for information on Ljubljana, while the main reason for those who do not search for this information is that it is "more readily accessible in other media".

Also notable for the development of political participation in the City of Ljubljana are answers to the question inquiring about the willingness for active participation in the development of virtual democracy, where respondents were asked if and how they would take part in political decision-making at the city and national levels.

Considering the decade-long "crisis of political participation" as recorded by surveys in Slovenia and abroad, the results indicate that Ljubljana residents are, to a high degree, "political beings". The 40-55 age group would like to communicate with the mayor most. Interestingly however, all other age groups – with the exception of the over 55 group – would prefer to communicate with the mayor via the Internet.

Table 3: Active participation of Ljubljana residents in the development of virtual democracy

	Daily	Weekly	Occasionally	Never
Searching for work-related information	33.7 %	26.2 %	28.4 %	11.7 %
Entertainment	17.9 %	18.4 %	33.2 %	30.4 %
Education	14.8 %	21.4 %	42.3 %	21.5 %
Telecommuting	12.7 %	8.4 %	18.4 %	60.4 %
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Also notable for the development of political participation in the City of Ljubljana are answers to the question inquiring about the willingness for active participation in the development of virtual democracy, where respondents were asked if and how they would take part in political decision-making at the city and national levels.

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Table 3: Active participation of Ljubljana residents in the development of virtual democracy

	Yes, via the Internet	Yes, but not via the Internet	No	Don't know
Write letter to the mayor	29.9%	30.5%	38.9%	0.7%
Write letter to a city councillor	24.6%	28.9%	45.0%	1.5%
Write letter to MP	24.9%	25.3%	48.6%	1.2%
Write letter to politicians or state officials	24.8%	22.2%	52.2%	0.8%
Sign petitions and letters of support	29.8%	42.4%	26.2%	1.5%
Take part in debates on specific problems	18.7%	18.5%	60.6%	2.1%
Take part in survey	31.5%	30.7%	35.5%	2.2%
Take part in voting, elections	30.4%	47.5%	20.7%	0.0%
Check political content	26.8%	26.2%	47.0%	1.4%
Search for official documents	45.2%	25.6%	28.4%	0.8%

Considering the high preference for cooperation in the city's political life and the willingness to participate, we believe the city should make better use of the political propensity discovered by this survey, and take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new platform to increase political participation. After all, this would give greater legitimacy and consensus to political decisions.

In addition to the secondarily politically engaged individuals and civil society groups, a range of subcultures has taken shape in the cyberspace of digital cities. These have often been mere transplants of existing and often dispersed groups into a new networked space of exchange, or they emerged as new subcultures that initially existed only in cyberspace. This subculture "plethora" is perhaps the greatest single contributor to the vibrancy of digital cities and, for us cybernauts, a clear indicator that divides the boring, bureaucratic (top-to-bottom) informatization – a particularly bad example of which is, unfortunately, Ljubljana – and the successful examples of vibrant digital spaces, which in Ljubljana primarily reside at Ljudmila and Kiber-pipa.

In the development of freely accessible info-urban habitats, the evolutionary potential for self-development is the crucial opportunity that planners should take into account of from the onset, creating entrance portals to digital cities with this goal in mind. These portals have to offer more than just administrative, formal, two-way political participation, institutional and business

areas. They need to include cyber (sub)spaces for the free expression of opinions and the formation of cyberspace interest groups, and take into account the variety of user groups in terms of demographics, income and interests.

Furthermore, the knowledge concealed from non-members of the emerging subcultures is the basis for the development of generalised exchange (See Trcek, 2002). Experts in individual fields offer their skills on their presentation pages to (usually) unknown seekers of information. This advice can be free and devoid of the expectation of reciprocity, or not. What emerges from this broad scope of knowledge are local urban (informal) microeconomies, which can combine through knowledge-exchange markets into networks of tacit knowledge. The exchange of information is also possible as a primarily non-monetary exchange. Networks of such micro-economies can intertwine by interest, as well as territorial principles, and combine exchanges in the cyber and physical space. Usually, the only obstacle to the success of such networks in globalised cyberspace is the poor knowledge of foreign languages, or the lack thereof.

The Internet and the New Spatial Plan for the City of Ljubljana – Towards a New Legitimacy of Spatial Planning

The use of the Internet can confer new legitimacy to spatial planning, since it emphasises mutual communication between city authorities and departments on the one side, and interested groups of residents – the public on the other. Ultimately, the idea is to use the Internet as a permanent space for public presentations of spatial plans, and a platform for public debates about these documents. This way, debates on spatial planning attract social groups that are usually excluded from such discussions, which would give spatial planning policies in the City of Ljubljana greater legitimacy.

The survey also asked the respondents about spatial planning as such, particularly the new spatial plan. It has been established that a large number of residents (31%) miss or somewhat miss (29%) information on spatial planning in the city, and that only 11% of the respondents are not interested in the issue at all. Yet only one third of those interested in spatial planning have heard about the drafting of the new spatial plan. Most have heard about it in newspapers (53%), TV (33%) and the city magazine Ljubljana (21%).

It is encouraging that 40% of those polled are willing to participate in the drafting of the new spatial plan, most of them through surveys (59%) and by taking part in spatial planning workshops (47%). Of those who are most interested in the city's spatial planning, as many as 17% believe they could contribute to the creation of the new spatial plan with their expertise. It is also interesting to note that residents feel that living in Ljubljana is the same (41%), better (26%) or markedly better (7%) as compared to a decade ago.

Table 4: Willingness of respondents to take part in the drafting of a new spatial plan for the City of Ljubljana

Take part in written and phone surveys	58.0 %
Take part in workshops where residents exchange views on spatial planning issues	46.7 %
Take part in presentations and public debates on new spatial plans	43.2 %
Take part in Internet surveys	37.2 %
Take part in online chatrooms dealing with spatial planning issues	29.4 %
Willing to participate on spatial planning team with my own expertise	17.2 %
Already taking part in the drafting of the spatial plan	2.8 %
Don't know	1.1 %

Among the respondents interested in the city's spatial planning, as many as 37% would take part in Internet surveys and 29% in chatrooms dedicated to the subject. These are relatively high shares of the informationalized population that have expressed interest in participating in the drafting of the new plan. The results also indicate that two-thirds of Internet users also search the Internet for information on Ljubljana, which should be considered in the creation of policies about communicating with the target segments of the public on all crucial development issues.

Of all Internet users, as many as 49% want to receive newsletters on the city's spatial plan via the Internet. While 18% would like to receive all news related to the plan, 31% want to get only those that they are personally interested in. Given an appropriate structure of newsletter, the e-news creators could cover all groups of residents that are crucial for the legitimacy of spatial planning, and include their desires and needs in the planning of the city's spatial development.

Considering the demographic and structural features of the respondents, it has been established that regular Internet users, men somewhat more than women, show the most interest in the city's spatial development concerns and participation in local virtual democracy. Additionally, age groups ranging from 25 to 40 are the ones that miss information about spatial development most. Of all the topical spatial development issues, respondents are best acquainted with the construction of a new central football stadium, which has also been receiving the greatest media coverage.

Results of the survey ultimately lead to the conclusion that the Internet is still an untapped resource that can be used to expand the debate of the city's spatial development. It is a new sphere of social interaction, whose cyber forums and presentation pages could be utilised to include groups that are typically excluded from the spatial planning process. Yet as long as the city's development policies fail to include operative guidelines on bridging the digital divide, the already marginalized urban groups of poorly educated, older and lowest-income residents will be excluded from the informatization processes and political life. The Internet is thus a medium that can expand the area of political participation and include those informationalized groups that are usually excluded from public debates into the city's political life. Yet without appropriate digital literacy policies, the Internet cannot contribute to a more vibrant and active political life in the city.

Conclusion

The analysis of the survey has shown that Ljubljana is distinctly more informationalized than Slovenia is on average. And if by regular users we mean people who use the Internet at least several times a week, the majority of Ljubljana's Internet population are regular users. The results also suggest that Ljubljana residents are largely willing to communicate with the local authorities via the Internet. Internet users, as well as other respondents, are most interested in accessing official documents online. Ultimately, people want an efficient virtual portal that will provide information on relevant administrative and political decisions in an accessible and transparent manner, and direct them with clear and easy to understand instructions towards solutions to their respective problems.

Regardless of the overall low political participation in cyberspace, Internet users are very optimistic about the Internet's potential in this respect. For them, the Internet is a democratic medium, since it is in many ways more efficient and simpler than current political practices. Moreover, the majority believe that participating in various debates through the Internet has become simpler, but that this type of Internet use is clearly poorly developed.

The results of the project *Virtual Ljubljana: Political Participation and Overcoming the Information Exclusion – Guidelines and Activities for Introducing Local Virtual Democracy*, suggest that many Ljubljana residents miss Internet-based information about their city's spatial plans, and that people have considerable interest in helping to create the new spatial plan. This leads to the conclusion that the Internet is an untapped resource which could be employed to expand discussions on the future spatial development of Ljubljana.

In Slovenia, the idea of virtual democracy is therefore apparently facing a unique paradox: it is clearly obvious that the implementation of virtual democracy is not plagued by distrust in the Internet or the lack of interest among users. The reasons for the failure of virtual democracies have to lie elsewhere – most probably with the current informatization policies, which are not all that successful. The currently successful virtual democracies are the result of concerted and synergetic efforts by informationally-minded city authorities and public administration, the providers of information services, civil society groups and especially, cyber subculture groups and the scientific potential of regional university and research centres. This is still missing in Slovenia.

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