Empowerment and Governance in the Information Society [1]

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[1] This document is a collection of articles appeared in *ICTlogy, review of ICT4D*, and that were put up together as a "position paper" for the the Ditchley Foundation conference "Democracy and the Power of the Individual", taking place at Ditchley Park (UK) on 3-5 February 2011. See last page for details.

1. The hourglass of information power

Recently — in the most recent years, but especially in recent months — the debate whether Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) empower or disempower, democratize a society or increase control over the citizen has been fuelled, both in the literature after appropriate research, and on newspapers, due to several events that have been read as turning points or milestones in the road towards the Information Society.

As it is usual in almost *any* debate around the impact of ICTs on the society, equidistant opinions are rare and extremes are much more abundant. In this case, it is my personal opinion that both extremes apply, that is, that there seem to be *two* divergent but simultaneous trends towards empowerment and towards a decrease in the quality of democracy or, as I will be putting it, a decrease in the quality of democracy (understood as a loss of control over governance by the citizen).

In the (sometimes difficult to avoid) trade-off between rigour and pedagogy, I have consciously chosen the latter in what follows. Many definitions are not very orthodox and most labels (and charts) are absolutely made up. I ask the reader for benevolence, forgiveness and, why not, the references that back (or refute) my arguments and that I was too lazy to look for.

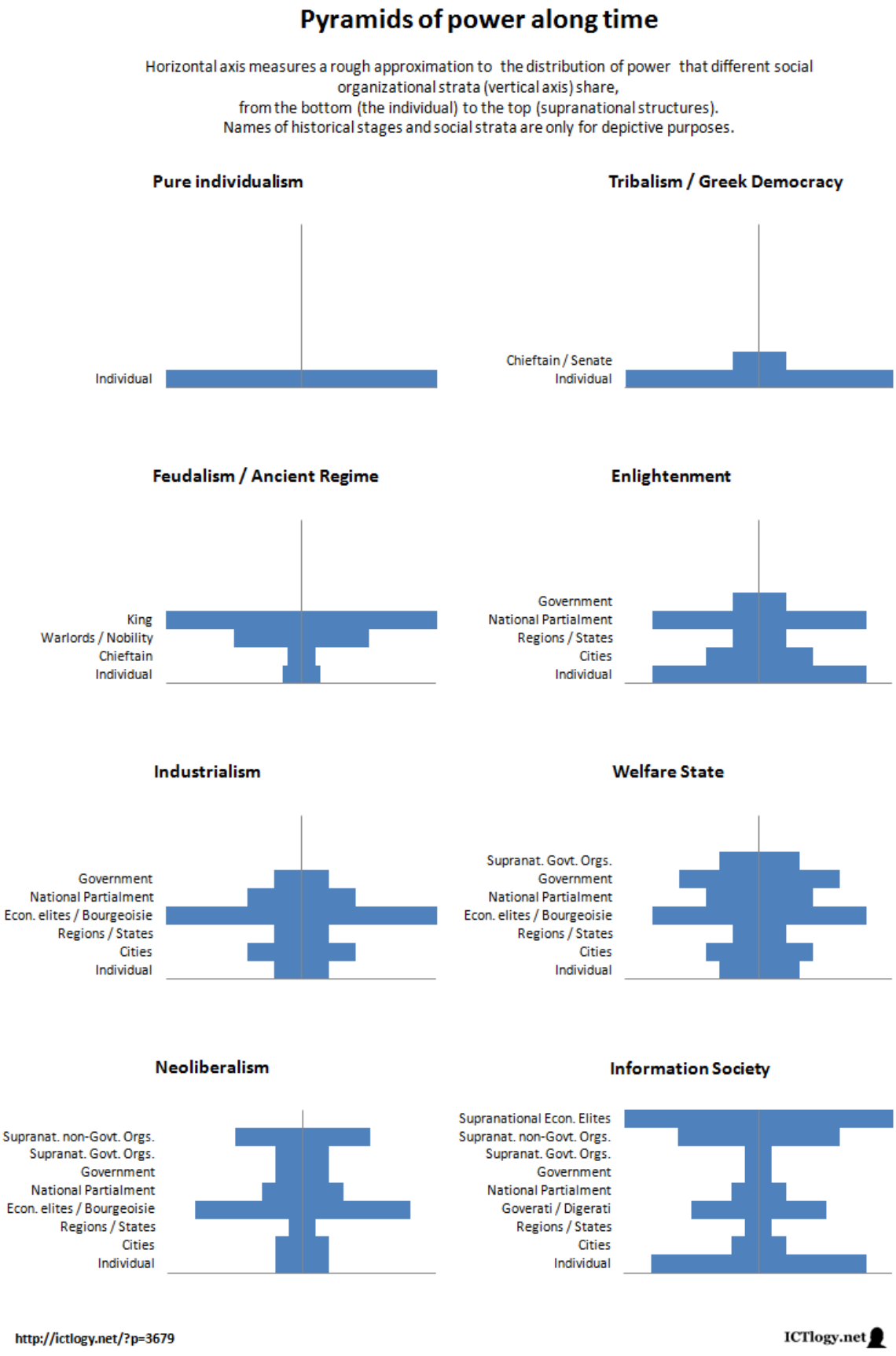
Let us (re)define power as: **Power = Empowerment + Governance**

Where:

- **Empowerment:** the capability to freely act and develop oneself within the system (very much in the line of Amartya Sen, 1980).
- **Governance:** the capability to rule and especially change the system itself (the institutional dimension of human development that, when in hands of the citizen, leads to effective democracy as described by Welzel, Inglehart & Klingemann; 2003).

According to these definitions, we can describe, even in a very rough manner, how power distribution has been like during history. The image below pictures an

approximation of this power distribution.



We can consider than in very primitive societies, the individual held all the power. As social organizations became more complex, the need for a minimal coordination comes evident: tribes got their chieftains to guide the collective. An organized procedure to choose the chieftain is what ended up in Greek Democracy. So far, the idea is that both empowerment and governance remain in the individuals' hands.

The growth of communities and the need to strengthen coordination — especially against the "threat" of other communities — imply (amongst other factors) the militarization of a society and, sooner or later, the seizure of power by the military chaste. Warlords and absolute kings (and also Pharaohs, etc.) do not only rule but also reduce the degree of freedom of their subjects: governance shifts upwards while empowerment is drastically reduced. It is the ideas behind the Enlightenment and of modern democracy that pretend to give some power back to the citizen while keeping governance (increasingly important) in the hands of nation-wide institutions.

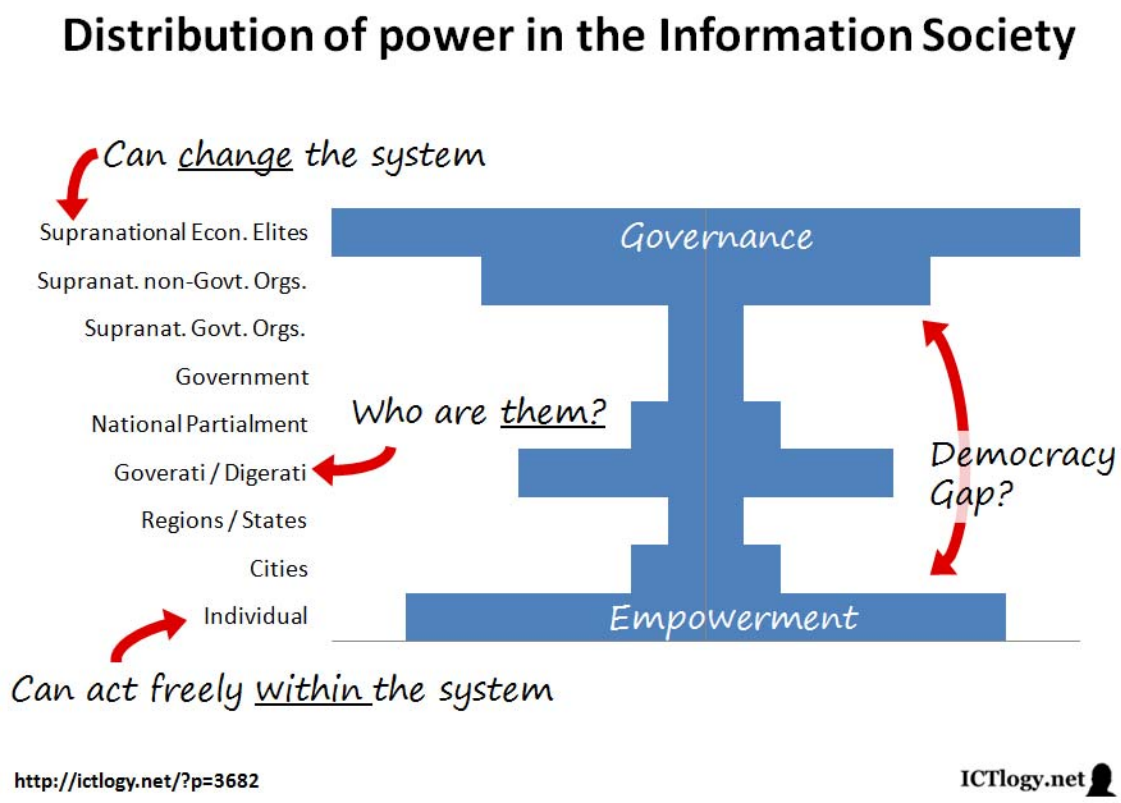
It is within this framework that capital becomes more important as industrialization deploys over all aspects of life. Gradually, economic elites gain more power with two parallel effects: on the one hand, what Marx called the alienation of the working class, now reduced to a mere production factor; on the other hand, the possibility to directly or indirectly affect all matters related to politics and the public sphere so to shape it for their own purposes. Again, the pendulum swung back and the Welfare State came to correct both the loss of freedom (and protection) of the citizen and to take some control of the public arena by keeping for itself the management of the Economy (Communist states pretend to be doing that too). New at this stage, supranational governmental organizations are created to coordinate what goes beyond the national powers: a new layer of power is born.

The strengthening of trend towards internationalization — ending up in sheer globalization — of the Economy has brought us in the past decades to a re-edition of industrialization, with the predominance of Neoliberalism setting the path of the Economy. Like industrialization, power shifts towards economic elites, but now split in two stages: the local and the global levels.

Many claim **that the Information Society is empowering back individuals**, and it well may definitely be true: never before as now can people or people have the potential to freely act, create, speak, reach out... within the given system. But it may also true that, **never before as now is governance — as the power to change the system — so far from the citizens' reach**... even of their direct representatives, which are controlled by higher powers, most of them out of anyone's jurisdiction. Like in an hourglass, the distribution of power is shifted to the (upper and lower) edges, the question being: who is playing the role of the transmission chain between these two edges?

2. Digerati, goverati and the role of ICT4D

So far, we have described a way to look at power, empowerment and governance, and ended up facing an odd distribution of power in the Information Society. A close up to that distribution may look like the following image:



This image aims at visualizing how power is distributed along all the strata of nowadays structure of society.

The lower part is a hat tip to cyberutopianism, at least on what concerns individual empowerment: I

believe there is enough evidence to strongly state that Information and Communication Technologies (the Internet and mobile phones and all the applications and appliances were unimaginable without them) have radically changed the degree up to which a human being can (potentially) manage their own life. Getting their own information (much more information, and on a very wide array of quality sources) and communicating with others at lowest costs and with no

barriers of time and space have changed the way we can socialize and become more empowered citizens; and being able to access very low cost production tools and being able to create from scratch is an empowerment leap compared to an industrial society where capital (as a production factor) was out of reach for most people.

The upper part, though, is a frontal opposition to the "now people rule the world" thesis. While people are absolutely more free/empowered to act within the system, the strings that manage and can actually change that system are way beyond the control of the e-empowered crowds. Indeed — and as recent economic and political events have proven — the ability to manage and change the system of the world is even beyond the control of the representatives of those crowds, that is, national governments and parliaments.

I believe that **there is a deep democratic gap** between the increasingly empowered citizens and the increasingly independent, non-transparent and non-accountable forces that rule the economic and political systems from the top. Traditional institutions — parties, governments, elected representatives — fail both in upwards transmitting the citizens' claims to shape a system according to their needs and wills, and both in top-down transmitting the need for some transformations that this system requires after the world has been made totally global, spaceless, timeless.

2.1. The good *goverati*, the bad *digerati* and the ugly outcome

Taking the place of those weakened democratic institutions, two new agents arise.

On the one hand we have **bad digerati** (bad not necessarily meaning evil, though their actions — consciously or unconsciously — do harm democracy as it is now designed), digitally literate elites that leverage their knowledge and the power provided by ICTs to reshape the state of things in their own benefit. These bad digerati understand the changes in society due to ICTs, the huge lag in Law to catch up with the pace of change, the digital illiteracy of governments, politicians and citizens, and succeed in circumventing democratic institutions. Incumbent telecom

operators, digital media corporations, news conglomerates, a-legal or plainly i(l)-legal businesses operating in the very verge of written law (some P2P network facilitators, some piracy-related firms, etc.), banks and financial services, etc. Many of them are but the local/national branch of supra-national institutions and organizations that fully scape the reach of governments jurisdictions and, thus, act totally out of control.

Good goverati aim just precisely at the opposite of bad digerati: correct and fix the democratic misadjustments that the Information Society brought with it. Knowledgeable and savvy both in digital and political matters, they leverage the power ICTs granted the citizenry to promote a more direct and committed involvement in public affairs: e-democracy and direct democracy, open government and open data, e-government and government 2.0, e-participation and hacktivism, etc. are some of the many initiatives that non-governmental organizations, government institutions, citizen collectives and individuals are fostering. In my opinion, though, they are quite often too helping to circumvent democratic institutions and contributing in their weakening. But the upper levels of power may actually

be far too high.

Thus, the ugly outcome is a **complete wreckage of the democratic transmission chain, a democratic gap** that both (bad) digerati and (good) goverati are but widening. Hence, the distance between the freely empowered citizen is also increasing, resulting in a democratic paradox: empowerment is not accompanied with better governance, but just the opposite. And in absence of a legitimate transmission chain, representative, plurally elected, we find different individuals and organizations (sometimes anonymous) that no one chose and that many times no one deeply knows their interests or their backing powers.

2.2. The role Goverati and the role of Information and Communication Technologies for (democratic) Development (ICT4D)

When talking about the intersection of Information and Communication

Technologies and Development (see, for instance ICTs, Development, disciplines and acronyms) it is very common to focus on empowerment or the empowering factor of ICTs.

Indeed, after years of cultural imperialism through development cooperation policies, development agents (especially development policies' beneficiaries or "developees") have developed certain allergies against anything that might sound as imposing a certain political system.

But if our approach proves to be right, empowerment is nowadays becoming but the XXIst century version of bread and circus: let the hamster spin the wheel at will, but don't it dare to open the cage.

ICTs focused only in empowerment are beginning to look like development policies focused only in humanitarian aid and relief, but with no sight on the far horizon: effective in the short term, a vicious spiral towards black hole in the long run.

In my opinion, ICT4D have *also* and *always* include a governance factor in their design, as development policies have to focus on sustainable development.

At their turn, **goverati should refrain from weakening or even attacking their democratic institutions**. We have seen some of these, and this does not mean that institutions and their people should not be totally transformed, but I think the only way to leverage empowerment for governance is, precisely, through democratic institutions, because I think they are, most times, the only legitimate bridge towards real change, towards real power.

To cite this work:

Peña-López, Ismael. (2011) "Empowerment and Governance in the Information Society". Position Paper for the Ditchley Foundation conference Democracy and the Power of the Individual. [mimeo]
<http://ictlogy.net/articles/20110204_ismael_pena-lopez_-_empowerment_governance_information_society.pdf>
[cited dd/mm/yyyy]

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- Empowerment and Governance in the Information Society (I): the hourglass of information power (http://ictlogy.net/review/?p=3679).
- Empowerment and Governance in the Information Society (II): digerati, goverati and the role of ICT4D (http://ictlogy.net/review/?p=3682).

Those article is closely related to the work that follows and, thus, its reading is encouraged by the author:

Peña-López, I. (2010). "Goverati: e-Aristocrats or the delusion of e-Democracy". In Parycek, P. & Prosser, A. (Eds.), *EDem2010. Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on E-Democracy*, 23-39. Keynote speech. Wien: Österreichische Computer Gesellschaft. Retrieved May 06, 2010 from http://ictlogy.net/articles/20100506_ismael_pena-lopez_-_goverati_e-aristocrats_delusion_e-democracy.pdf

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See also the author's blog on the Information Society, the Digital Divide and ICT4D:
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