

Giancarlo Vilella

# E-Democracy

On Participation in the Digital Age



Nomos

Giancarlo Vilella

# E-Democracy

On Participation in the Digital Age



**Nomos**

**Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek** lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

ISBN 978-3-8487-5436-6 (Print)  
978-3-8452-9638-8 (ePDF)

**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-3-8487-5436-6 (Print)  
978-3-8452-9638-8 (ePDF)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Vilella, Giancarlo

E-Democracy

On Participation in the Digital Age

Giancarlo Vilella

93 p.

Original title: Introduzione alla E-Democracy, Edizioni Pendragon, Bologna, 2019

ISBN 978-3-8487-5436-6 (Print)  
978-3-8452-9638-8 (ePDF)

1st Edition 2019

© Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden, Germany 2019. Printed and bound in Germany.

This work is subject to copyright. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers. Under § 54 of the German Copyright Law where copies are made for other than private use a fee is payable to "Verwertungsgesellschaft Wort", Munich.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Nomos or the author.

## Table of Contents

I. A warning and preface to an atypical analysis	9
II. Technological innovation within the concept of democracy	12
III. Democracy and technological asymmetry	18
IV. Innovation and the law	25
V. Innovation and security	34
VI. Innovation and politics	41
VII. E-participation and the semantic web	50
VIII. Digitalising administration (based on the Italian case)	55
IX. Digitalising public authorities: the case of the European Parliament	60
X. Publications and access to documents in the era of digitisation: the experience of the European Publications Office	68
XI. Innovation, society and health	73
XII. Innovation and the economy	78
XIII. Introduction to E-Democracy	85
Conclusions	92



Original title: *Introduzione alla E-Democracy*, Pendragon, Bologna, 2019.  
The present English version has been enriched with new elements.

The opinions expressed in this work are personal and are not attributable to either the institution to which I belong or any other European body.



## I. A warning and preface to an atypical analysis

Technology, general innovation and, in particular, information technology are now at the very centre of our world when you look at it from any angle. They have an impact on every aspect of our society: from legal matters to, obviously, political ones, as well as economic, sociological and cultural issues. The new cybernetic world has changed our very existence in every sector, with important changes that also affect democratic participation. In one important multidisciplinary study, these issues have been well documented<sup>1</sup>: the digitalisation of every facet of our lives is fuelling a revolution in our society that is even more radical than the one brought about by the industrial revolution two centuries ago. The companies that manage the internet are in a position where they can control practically all activities, by allowing apps to calculate more or less exactly what we are thinking. Spying activities now call into question the right to private information. According to the study, this has created a sense of alarm, if not catastrophic prospects for our freedoms. In short, technological innovation has a direct and indirect impact on our democracy and it is therefore essential to contribute to the ongoing discussion.

This book shows that and aims to make clear that the impact of rapidly evolving technologies on our democratic system is immediate and significant. This effort is the result of:

- my experience as director-general of innovation and technological support at the European Parliament, a position I started way back in 2011;
- my first musings on the subject, which are collected in *Innovazione tecnologica e democrazia*<sup>2</sup>, which was a theoretical reflection closely linked to my aforementioned experience;

---

1 F. Schirmacher (Hg.), *Technologischer Totalitarismus. Eine Debatte*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2015. More recently, see journal “Aspenia”, no. 80, 2018, largely dedicated to the subject of digital power and democracy, including numerous essays that analyse different sectors.

2 Pendragon, Bologna 2015.



*I. A warning and preface to an atypical analysis*

- my lectures at the University of Milan, delivered in spring 2017 and 2018, as teacher of e-democracy and e-participation<sup>3</sup>;
- Important updates and even more important expansions of the book (which preceded this work) *Introduzone alla E-Democracy*<sup>4</sup> arising from the debate that developed around that very book, in various seminars that I will detail later on.

The atypical nature of the analysis that follows depends on the fact that I had the fortune and joy to find, over the course of two academic years, a very motivated, active and eager class that wanted to throw themselves fully into the issues raised by the course, which, in both cases led into long seminars and lengthy debate. This was all enriched by the participation of qualified guests that added greatly to the analysis in question. Here I have to thank both groups. Obviously, it was I that processed the results of those debates, so it is I that assumes responsibility for the analysis that has come out of that process.

The book will proceed along the following lines. First off, I will attempt to show the significance of adding an “e” to the concepts of democracy and participation, as well as showing the consequences of breaking information technology into the activities of actors (citizens, parties, institutions), democracy and its powers. Then the analysis will continue by demonstrating the influence of information technology (the “e”) on the law, security and the world of politics: an in-depth analysis will be dedicated to specific sectors. Then I will look into the concept of e-participation; namely, the impact of technologies on citizen participation in the management of public affairs. The following three chapters will be dedicated to three case studies, based on previous reflections: the digitalisation of Italy’s administration, the advanced experience of the European Parliament and, finally, the publication of and access to documents (citing the experience of the European Publications Office). The analysis will be rounded off with a detailed look into fields like society, economy and health which are important factors in the maintenance of democratic systems. Finally, I will go through the conclusions of this brief (but hopefully useful) introduction to e-democracy. The **closing** is an improvised digression but it explains my thoughts on the issues.

---

3 In this regard, I would like to thank deeply the president of the Administration and Public Policies (APP) study programme, Professor Gabriele Bottino, for his support and trust in me, as well as for encouraging me to publish this book.

4 Pendragon, Bologna 2018.