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The mechanics of democracy promotion tools: bridging the knowledge-to-practice gap

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ABSTRACT

By drawing upon the literature that diagnoses the gap between academics and practitioners, this article categorises and describes the traditional democracy promotion tools developed by international governmental and non-governmental organisations to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice. Further, it examines the utility of ICTs in promoting and upholding democratic change. The findings inform considerations and specific recommendations offered to the tool developers on how to converge traditional and new democracy promotion tools. These are intended to assist in focusing tool design and development efforts, and promoting standardisation and innovation.

En s'inspirant des documents qui diagnostiquent l'écart entre les universitaires et les praticiens, cet article catégorise et décrit les outils traditionnels de promotion de la démocratie élaborés par les organisations gouvernementales et non gouvernementales internationales pour combler l'écart entre les connaissances et la pratique. De plus, il examine l'utilité des TIC au moment de promouvoir et de faire valoir les changements démocratiques. Les conclusions éclairent des considérations et des recommandations précises proposées à ceux qui élaborent les outils sur la manière de faire converger les outils de promotion de la démocratie traditionnels et nouveaux. Ils sont conçus pour contribuer à concentrer les efforts de conception et d'élaboration des outils et à promouvoir la standardisation et l'innovation.

A partir de la literatura que analiza la brecha existente entre académicos y operadores, el presente artículo clasifica y describe las herramientas empleadas tradicionalmente para promover la democracia. Desarrolladas por organizaciones gubernamentales y no gubernamentales, dichas herramientas se orientan a salvar la brecha entre conocimiento y práctica. Asimismo, el artículo examina la utilidad de las TIC [tecnologías de información y comunicación] a la hora de promover y sostener el cambio democrático. Los hallazgos surgidos en este sentido permiten fundamentar aquellas consideraciones y recomendaciones específicas, dirigidas a los diseñadores de herramientas, respecto a cómo combinar las herramientas tradicionales y modernas con el objetivo de promover la democracia. Las mismas tienen la intención de contribuir a precisar el diseño de herramientas y de acciones de desarrollo, así como de fomentar su estandarización e innovación.

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Introduction

Translating knowledge into action seems logical and easy. However, there are many challenges to it, especially when translating academic knowledge into practice. Battaglio and Scicchitano (2013,

749–752) find that the knowledge gap between academics and practitioners was first diagnosed in the 1940s and summarise factors that contribute to the intellectual divide. These include: different audiences, viewpoints, interests, intellectual approaches, research methods, and styles of discourse. Some authors express concern that the intellectual divide is increasing nowadays. Rynes, Giluk, and Brown (2007, 987) argue that the failure to implement research-supported practices have been observed in nearly every field where separation exists between those who conduct research and those who are in a position to implement research findings. This problem seems to affect some disciplines more than others. Posner (2009, 13) argues that, similar to schools of engineering and law which are disciplined by a marketplace that demands well-trained students, traditional academic disciplines such as history, sociology, or political science must cater to the needs of external audiences or practitioners.

When it comes to applying academic knowledge in the area of international development, researchers mainly investigate challenges related to collaboration between academics and NGOs. Roper (2002, 339) elaborates that academic researchers are focused on identifying generalised rules, often using sophisticated research techniques, while practitioners are trying to solve a particular problem in a particular setting. She further argues that general rules rarely provide a useful guide to action, hence academic–practitioner collaborations can be problematic. Among the obstacles for collaboration, Aniekwe et al. (2012, 4) emphasise NGOs' need for quick results and positive stories, while academics are more focused on producing high-level peer-reviewed papers than outputs that are accessible and convenient for practitioners' use. Bertucci, Borges-Herrero, and Fuentes-Julio (2014, 55) also point to the gap between academic and policy work. Accordingly, literature on international relations is dominated by a sense of gap, whereby practitioners generally conceive scholarly work as too abstract and focused on satisfying the intellectual demands of other scholars, rather than responding to the pressing issues that policymakers must deal with on a daily basis. In return, many scholars disregard the work of practitioners as oversimplified and lacking analytical rigor.

Factors for improved academic–NGO collaboration suggested by Roper (2002, 340–345) include: clarity about the goals of collaboration; understanding participants' stakes; and ensuring that academic engagement matches the needs, capacities, and interests of the NGO partner. In addition, she points to positive trends that help to diminish the academic–practitioner divide, including: masters-level education programmes that are geared towards practitioners; opportunities for academics to work within the UN system; bilateral aid agencies and prominent NGOs; and an increasing number of institutions that seek to serve as a bridge between NGOs and academics. Aniekwe et al. (2012, 4) note that researchers are under increased pressure to demonstrate the relevance of their research, which has resulted in increased work on “research-to-use” and the “research-to-policy” interfaces offered to users within developing countries and internationally, such as politicians, policymakers, practitioners, and activists. Furthermore, they argue that, despite some scholarly arguments about clear divides between academics and NGO practitioners, there are many overlapping areas and exchanges of people between the two fields, including: policy, dissemination, training, discussion, stakeholder engagement, research collaboration, data collection, fieldwork facilitation, expert advisors, and lobbying. According to their scheme, academics have the sole responsibility of theory-building, teaching, and publishing, while NGOs are responsible for interventions, action, and implementation. Bertucci, Borges-Herrero, and Fuentes-Julio (2014, 55) point to the fact that many scholars have “in-and-out” access to policy-making. Namely, social scientists very often serve as governmental or presidential advisors and several even hold ministerial and presidential positions. With respect to bridging the gap between academic research and policy processes, they advise academics to: produce usable knowledge; link research to significant world events; convene scholar–practitioners' meetings; synthesise research findings into digestible components; develop relations of trust with allies in government; participate in government; provide concrete policy recommendations based on rigorous research and cost-effectiveness; and integrate practitioners into academic departments. Brown et al. (2003, 84) emphasise the importance of practice–research exchange (PRE) in democratising knowledge as the way for enabling marginalised groups to join in the social construction of knowledge, awareness, and action. Finally Brown and Gaventa (2010, 22) find that

transnational action research and learning networks can play vital roles in bridging differences between diverse disciplines, North and South, practice and research, local and global, create new knowledge, and catalyse innovations in policy and practice.

By building on existing research, this article explores the *mechanics of democracy promotion tools* developed by international governmental and non-governmental organisations to bridge the gap between contemporary academic knowledge and practice. Scrutiny of these tools will allow for classification and the description of common denominators. Additionally, the potential and challenges associated with the use of ICT-based applications in bridging the knowledge-to-action gap in the area of democracy promotion is explored. The findings inform considerations and practical recommendations for tool developers that are offered in the article. These are intended to serve as practical orientation points for the convergence of traditional and contemporary democracy promotion tools.

Tools for promoting democracy agenda: bridging the knowledge–practice gap

The assortment of things that can be considered a “tool” is wide-ranging. In “Philosophy of Tools”, Fiebleman (1967, 329) defined tools as “*material objects employed to alter other material objects*”. Nowadays, non-material tools, such as software applications, are likely to outnumber material tools. For this reason, this article takes on broad definitions that describe tools as “devices that aid in accomplishing a task”, or as “a means to an end”.

The development of tools is particularly popular among international organisations that promote the democracy agenda. This agenda is sometimes hard to isolate from other development support. The EU (2008, 5) places support to democratisation under governance themes, together with: promotion and protection of human rights; reinforcement of the rule of law and the administration of justice; enhancement of the role of civil society; public administration reform, management of public finances, and civil service reform; and decentralisation and local government reform. The USAID strategy framework for supporting the establishment and consolidation of inclusive and accountable democracies (2013, 14) includes: promotion of participatory, representative, and inclusive political processes and government institutions; fostering greater accountability of institutions and leaders to citizens and to the law; protecting and promoting universally recognised human rights; and improving development outcomes. With regards to the scope of democracy support, this article aligns with definition provided by Menocal, Fritz, and Rakner (2007, 4). It focuses on the key areas of elections and electoral processes, political parties, judicial reforms, civil society, and media.

Most democracy promotion tools have a dual purpose. The first is to enhance the knowledge and skills of actors who engage in supporting democratic processes in different countries. Such expertise, usually availed by international specialists, has been critical in sustaining democratic processes in many transitional democracies. Direct engagement may, for example, be focused on political party or civil society capacity building, advising national stakeholders on judicial reforms, supporting governments in preparations and conduct of elections, training media on ethical reporting, and so on. However, the prospects for direct engagement of international experts is not always even. Very often, it depends on the openness of national authorities to receive external support and interest from donors. Therefore, the second – perhaps even more important – purpose of democracy promotion tools is to ensure that relevant knowledge can reach on-the-ground practitioners, including government agencies and officials, as well as civil society groups and activities; or as Brown (2001, 2) puts it: “*those embedded in institutional contexts that press them to solve practical problems*”.

While numerous organisations develop tools for democracy practitioners, efforts to categorise these tools are limited. Brown (2001, 34) refers to several practitioners’ tools used to understand and address complex political, economic, and social problems, namely: “Solve Puzzle” for finding answers to well defined problems; “Identify Issue” for building multiple views for understanding complex and ill-structured problems; “Assess Interventions” for improvement and documenting quality of interventions and best practice; and “IdDevelop Fields” for long-term co-inquiry to build perspectives, theory, and practice in new domains. The UK Department for International

Table 1. Example of democracy promotion tools that aim to connect knowledge and practice.

Title and originator	Type/format	Brief description
Resource Guide on Strengthening Judicial Integrity and Capacity The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)	Knowledge tool/guide	Aims to support and inform those who are tasked with reforming and strengthening the justice systems of their countries, as well as development partners, international organisations, and other providers of technical assistance.
iKnow Politics Partnership of international organisations	Knowledge tool/ website	An online workspace created to help elected officials, candidates, political party leaders and members, researchers, students, and other practitioners interested in advancing women in politics. It allows user to access resources, create knowledge, and share experiences.
Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) Partnership of national and international organisations	Training tool/ curriculum	Includes 24 training modules designed to be used as a tool within a broader capacity development framework. Each module draws on relevant knowledge resource materials.
Strengthening Political Party Representatives in Namibia Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) and Namibia Institute for Democracy (NID)	Training tool/ manual	Aims to build knowledge, skills, and experience of Namibian political parties in order for them to play a vital role in promoting a democratic political system.
Political-process monitoring: Activist tools and techniques National Democratic Institute (NDI)	Assessment and analysis tool/guide	Resource and manual for any organisation implementing its own political process monitoring programme or supporting the monitoring work of others. Qualitative research, desk review of NDI programmes, and interviews constitute the knowledge base.
Electoral Risk Management Tool International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA)	Assessment and analysis tool/desktop software	Integrates: digital knowledge resource libraries that draw on contemporary academic knowledge and practices; GIS-based analytical instruments that allow data upload and analysis; and comparative action options based on good practices.

Note: Tools presented in this table are not the result of systematic scoping. These are chosen by the author because of familiarity with some, but primarily with consideration for diversity relating to: format, scope, knowledge base, and geographical origin.

Development (DFID) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) are among the few organisations that have produced specific publications on tools. DFID's (2003) *Tools for Development* lists a number of tools for DFID staff consideration when designing and implementing development programmes. Tools detailed in the document include stakeholder analysis, participatory techniques, handbooks, visioning, team building events, workshops, and so on. The Overseas Development Institute (Hovland and Start 2004) provides a comprehensive overview of 30 tools that can be used by NGO researchers specifically to influence policy. These are divided into four clusters: communication tools; context assessment tools; policy influence tools; and research tools.

It seems that existing classifications have emerged from the need to catalogue tools that can be used by specific communities of practice to achieve specific objectives. The broader discussion relating to the categorisation of tools and formats which are the most suitable for connecting contemporary knowledge and practice, as well as to encompass the increasing importance of ICTs, is missing.

Even simple scrutiny of tools developed by prominent democracy assistance providers allows for the differentiation of three major tool templates with a proven capacity to link knowledge and practice. These are: *knowledge resource tools*, *training tools*, and *analysis and assessment tools*. Table 1 presents several tools, developed by regional and global IGOs and NGOs mandated to promote democracy, and categorises them according to the proposed typology. A brief description indicates their common denominators.

Not every handbook, training, or assessment and analysis tool is developed with the particular intention to connect knowledge and practice. However, the proposed categorisation allows analysis of the potential of specific templates to bridge the gap between knowledge and action, and illuminating how these tools are employed by their originators. Furthermore, one may explore how different formats utilise ICTs and interrelate.

Knowledge resource tools

These tools serve the purpose of organising, typologysing, and presenting a broader body of knowledge generated by democracy researchers and practitioners, and making it widely accessible. This is important as the occasional reader may find hard to access and comprehend contemporary research and practice. On one hand, social science research is fragmented in books and scientific journals which are not openly shared. On the other hand, democracy practitioners often lack skills and incentives to record and publish good practices. High-quality knowledge resource tools are able to balance theory and practice by conveying main academic conclusions and by bringing practical experiences relating to good and problematic practices. The ambition of developers of knowledge resource tools is to arm readers with the knowledge and comparative reference points that can be translated into policy and actions through their professional engagement or activism. The comparative advantage of these tools is in their wide reach and accessibility. Traditionally, knowledge resource tools are provided in the form of handbooks. These are convenient for dissemination during thematic conferences and knowledge fairs, through the field work of international and national organisations, or through direct shipment to interested stakeholders. The progress of ICTs has revolutionised the potential for the distribution of knowledge resource tools. Publications in digital formats allowed for the drastic reduction of production costs, while the internet enables accessibility and dissemination to interested users from any corner of the world. Web-based platforms can, in addition to consolidating knowledge resources, provide a space where academics and practitioners can exchange experiences and advices.

Challenges in the design of knowledge resources relate to their scope. Some social phenomena are complex; hence the level of detail may be difficult to contemplate in a single knowledge resource. If the knowledge resource is too generic, its practical application will be contingent on the readers' ability to interpret and translate new knowledge into practice. On the other hand, when the scope is focused on a narrow geographical region, or designed to cover the phenomenon only partially, it may lose global relevance.

Training tools

Their purpose is to introduce or enhance the knowledge and skills of democracy professionals and activists who attend training events. Training tools, usually developed as training modules and curriculums, are anchored in specific knowledge resource materials. While these are used by trainers, they are also shared with the participants as preparatory reading or handouts. Training events are conducted in carefully created environments where participants can interact with expert trainers or facilitators and a peer group. Training events utilise adult learning methodologies, such as role play, group exercises, presentations, and reflections in order to facilitate knowledge transfer and skill-building. Interactions and reflections between peers, in particular relating to real-life experiences, allow participants to better interpret and adopt novel concepts. If participants represent different communities of practice, or confronted groups that populate the same social setting, their interaction may facilitate learning different perspectives and reconcile differences.

One of the main challenges related to application of democracy-related training tools is in beneficiaries' dependency on training providers. In contexts where national stakeholders are unable to invest in training courses, they depend on external support. Furthermore, the seniority of individuals who attend the training will often determine the prospects for the application of newly acquired knowledge and skills within their organisations. Nevertheless, because of the interactive learning and development of practical skills, training tools are situated closer to action than knowledge resource tools. With the progress in ICTs, many organisations now offer online democracy training courses. This ensures wider reach, but can deprive participants of group dynamics, which is the key advantage of training tools.

Assessment and analysis tools

These tools are created to assist users in developing the situational awareness needed for making informed policy and action decisions. Both assessment and analysis tools use almost the same methodology, but they vary in their implementation. Assessment tools are applied to evaluate the situation at the specific point in time, while analytical tools are used for the continuous monitoring of a situation. Accordingly, assessment tools are appropriate for building an understanding of democratic processes which are not dynamic, that is, unlikely to change in a short time. Examples would include the state of media freedom or the overall state of democracy. Such findings are useful for informing policy decisions. Analytical tools are suitable for building understanding of dynamic processes. Where the situation can change fast, for example during preparations and conduct of elections, monitoring is needed to maintain awareness that can inform day-to-day decisions. Assessment and analysis may synergise, whereby the former can be conducted as initial step that helps focus analytical efforts on critical areas. Depending on the methodological complexity, these tools can be developed as guides, assessment matrices, surveys, software applications, or a combination of any of these. They are usually anchored in specific knowledge resources, and rely on training in building users' knowledge and skills to successfully implement assessment and analysis. Assessment and analysis tools are able to stretch further than knowledge resource or training tools in connecting theory and practice. In this respect, links may be drawn with models discussed in the information and knowledge literatures. According to Rowley (2007, 171–173), authors agree that the relationship between data, information, and knowledge is hierarchical. Accordingly: *data* items are an elementary and recorded description of things, events, activities, and transactions; *information* is an aggregation of data that makes decision making easier; and *knowledge* (or *actionable knowledge*) is information combined with understanding and capability.

There are several challenges relating to the practical application of democracy assessment and analysis tools. First, they require genuine data. This implies challenges common to any data collection exercise, such as costs and biases in the design and interpretation of surveys. Furthermore, successful implementation of assessment and analysis tools is contingent on the quality of the knowledge resource base and training. While knowledge resources and training tools are suitable for engaging top-level decision-makers, assessment and analysis tools are usually operated by a mid-to-low ranked officials who only convey information to policy and decision-making instances. It is therefore essential that leaders have ownership of assessment and analysis outputs. ICT development has revolutionised the potential for improvement of these tools through greater access to data, new methods for data collection, analysis, management, and visual presentation.



Figure 1. Interrelation of traditional tools.

Figure 1 illustrates how different categories of tools interrelate. While knowledge resource tools can exist effectively without the training tools and the analysis and assessment capacity, the other two would be deficient without the knowledge resource base. This also applies to the relationship between the training tools and the assessment and analysis tools, whereby the former is not contingent on the latter, which may not be the case the other way around.

However, the evidence of the role that ICT-based platforms play in facilitating processes of democratic change is attracting increased attention among academics and practitioners, as well as tool developers. Therefore, it is important to illuminate the potential of ICT-based platforms, in particular those frequently used by democracy practitioners, to contribute to bridging the knowledge to action gap in this domain.

New ICT platforms as democracy tools – use of social media and crowdsourcing

“It’s really sort of the realization of our original dream, that the computer would not be a machine for computation, but would be metamorphosed into a tool for communication. And with the Web, that’s finally happening. I think the Web is going to be profound in what it does to our society.” (Foresman 1995)

Indeed, the speed and the scope in which technological progress is changing our lives have become hard to comprehend. The digital revolution, and ICT progress in particular, continues to revolutionise the way in which we communicate and learn as individuals and groups; how we find and share information; and how we act. The ability to join, create, and expand virtual communities makes individuals and social groups less dependent on traditional opinion leaders such as politicians, journalists, or academics. The evidence of the use of ICTs in instigating and empowering citizens’ demands for democracy creates much enthusiasm among academics, practitioners, and tool developers. According to Howard (2011, 11), ICTs are a useful infrastructure for transposing democratic ideals from community to community. They also support the process of learning new approaches to political representation; the testing of new organisational strategies; and the extension of possibilities and prospects for political transformation from one context to another. Diamond (2010, 70) refers to new ICTs as “*liberation technology*” that empowers individuals, facilitates independent communication and mobilisation, and strengthens an emerging civil society. For Diamond, liberation technology is any form of ICT that can expand political, social, and economic freedom.

While there is no doubt that the ICT revolution expands the universe of the democratic theory and practice, the way in which ICTs can be best utilised to bridge the gap between knowledge and action remains indistinct. The immediate question is whether ICTs can nurture a new category of knowledge-to-practice tools, or if they should merely be seen as a new means for advancing the effectiveness of traditional tools. This calls for an exploration into the opportunities and challenges relating to the application of ICT tools in democratic processes. The focus is on two types of applications that are increasingly used by citizens and democracy organisations to promote democratic action, namely: social media and crowdsourcing.

Social media as democracy promotion tool

Although developed and primarily used to facilitate online communication and social networking, social media applications – such as Facebook, Twitter and other web-based information sharing portals – are widely used by different state and non-state actors as democracy promotion tools. In democratic societies in particular, state actors use social media to enhance communication with the broader citizenry in order to sustain the principal–agent relationship.

Citizens use social media for influencing democratic processes in both democratic and non-democratic societies. Through social media, individuals and groups share information, form opinions, impose pressure on the governments to initiate reforms and bring about democratic changes, and mobilise for action (Diamond 2010, 69–82). The use of social media seems to be particularly effective in enabling the mass mobilisation of social groups and individuals, which may not be affiliated with

any formally organised social group, to join protests and demand democracy. Examples include the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine in 2004 (Diamond 2010, 78), the “Twitter Revolution” in Moldova in 2009 (Auer 2011, 712), and the “Arab Spring” in 2010/11 (Howard et al. 2011, 2–4).

Crowdsourcing as democracy promotion tool

Crowdsourcing is another ICT-based platform that is increasingly used in democratic processes. By definition, it is an open call for anybody to participate in an open/online task (Aitamurto 2012, 8). With respect to democracy promotion, Aitamurto (2012, 18–29) identifies several cases where crowdsourcing was established and used by policymakers to inform decisions relating to: constitutional reform in Iceland; national dialogues in the USA; participatory budgeting in Chicago and Calgary; citizens’ petitions in the UK, USA, and Australia; and establishing the Open ministry in Finland.

Similar to social media, crowdsourcing is also widely used by non-state actors. Civil society organisations utilise and customise web-based applications to invite the general public to report on what they have witnessed. Reports can be submitted in different formats such as text messages, photo, audio, video files, and so on, and may relate to democratic malpractices. One of the most popular, hence best researched crowdsourcing application used in democratic processes is the USHAHIDI platform. This highly customisable and Google maps-based platform is made available as a global public good that is customisable by end users. For these reasons, it is frequently deployed by civil society organisations to observe the quality of democracy; for example, to collect data and generate actionable information related to corruption or electoral malpractices. Implementation of this and similar platforms does not only have an effect of deterring the potential perpetrators of undemocratic practices, but also placing pressure on state institutions to act based on evidence collected through crowdsourcing.

Challenges

The main strength of social media and crowdsourcing tools, namely being open to everyone’s participation, is also their greatest weakness. Since virtually anybody can join discussions and contribute data, these platforms are vulnerable to spoilers. In a country context where political stakes are high and resistance to genuine democratic change exists, data corruption and the intentional manipulation with information is possible. Verification efforts can help protect against abuses, but may require resources that the tool user cannot commit. Howard (2011, 8) describes the case of the 2009 post-election demonstration in Iran when the use of Twitter and Facebook by anti-government protesters was countered by the government’s security apparatus who began using these applications to spread disinformation. Diamond (2010, 80) warns that the use of internet filtering and surveillance techniques by undemocratic regimes is becoming both more widespread and increasingly sophisticated. Brothers and McNulty (2014, 39) acknowledge that data collected through crowdsourcing may be biased toward negative incidents and toward areas where citizens are better informed about the crowdsourcing effort, such as in urban areas, and may be manipulated by “bad actors” who submit false reports. One should also keep in mind that ICTs may depend on operational telephone and internet networks, which can suffer technical failures or can be blocked by the government. Such was the case of the YouTube blockage in Turkey in 2014. In this respect, the 2013 Freedom on the Net report by Freedom House indicates a decline in internet freedom worldwide, with 34 out of 60 assessed countries experiencing a negative trajectory during the reporting period. According to the report (2013, 1): *“Of particular concerns are the proliferation laws, regulations, and directives to restrict online speech, a dramatic increase in arrests of individuals for something they posted online; legal cases and intimidation against social-media users; and a rise in surveillance.”*

With respect to the use of existing ICT applications for bridging the knowledge-to-practice gap in the area of democracy promotion, a systemic weakness of the modern ICT-based tools is their disconnect from the knowledge resource base. Social media and crowdsourcing applications are not

designed to educate users about the phenomenon of concern, which is an inherent feature of all traditional tools designed to promote democratic action. As Howard (2011, 12) puts it: “*In times of political crisis, banal tools for wasting time, like Twitter and YouTube, become the supporting infrastructure of social movements.*” Therefore, he warns that: “*It would be a mistake to tie any theory of social change to a particular piece of software.*” Morozov (2013, 274) goes further in saying that:

“If the sad experience of 1990s has taught us anything, it’s that successful transition require a strong state and relatively orderly public life. The Internet, so far, has posed a major threat to both.”

Crowdsourcing platforms certainly have the potential to include features specifically designed to educate and train the public, but – to the best of authors’ knowledge – this has not been the case so far. True, this may be unnecessary when the online task is simple and non-controversial, or as Morozov (2013, 270) puts it – apolitical. For example, following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, social media and crowdsourcing applications were used to invite people to contribute information on people in need of aid. In such cases, it is fair to assume that everyone capable of using the phone and sending an SMS is also able to make a genuine judgement if people need urgent help, such as being trapped under rubble. However, when crowdsourcing is established to collect data on intricate democratic practices, such as instances of illicit political party funding, electoral irregularities, or other democratic malpractices, the quality of data received will be contingent on contributors’ knowledge of what constitutes democratic misbehaviours. This may not always be a simple task, and making a qualified judgement may require training. Therefore, it is sometimes the case that a relatively small percentage of individuals, which constitute a part of the pre-established – hence knowledgeable – network, contribute to crowdsourcing efforts with a disproportionately high number of reports, as indicated by Meier (2012, 100) when examining use of USHAHIDI during the 2010 Egyptian elections. Because of numerous challenges, Brothers and McNulty (2014, 39–40) underline the importance of using trained observers. Along these lines, Bailard and Livingston (2014, 6) argue that crowdsourcing by the general public can not and should not replace traditional monitoring initiatives, but can serve as an important complement due to its capacity to surmount some of the barriers that tend to constrain traditional monitoring efforts.

Returning to the question posed earlier – whether new ICTs can nurture a new category of “knowledge-to-practice” tools or if they should be merely seen as a new means for advancing the effectiveness of traditional tools – it may be fair to acknowledge that the jury is still out. ICTs do not make traditional democracy promotion tools obsolete. Instead, there is a symbiosis in which traditional tools may become more effective through utilisation of ICTs. In the same way, experience shows that use of social media and crowdsourcing platforms in democracy promotion will yield better results if those who participate have prior knowledge of the concerned subject.

Practical considerations and recommendations for tool developers

With the divergent trajectories of contemporary social science and social action, whereby the former is fragmented, hidden from, and less understandable to ordinary readers, while the latter is taking a life detached from knowledge, developers of tools that aim to connect the two have a difficult task.

On the knowledge side, things are complex, but orderly. The rigor with which academic knowledge is organised helps its consolidation; given that those who attempt to do so have the expertise and resources to be methodical. The main challenge may be in overcoming existing gaps relating to *undemocratic knowledge production*, described by Brown et al. (2003, 97–99), and *ignorance of knowledge and epistemicide of the South*, described by De Sousa Santos (2014, 188–191, 209). Consolidation of knowledge resources must therefore balance disproportions in knowledge production and reconcile epistemological barriers that exists between the Global South and North. On the social action side, things are less orderly as individuals and social groups working in democratic epicentres are not always sufficiently methodological in documenting and publicising their experiences. In particular, there is a need to better comprehend the increasing use of ICTs in promoting and empowering

contemporary democracy activism. The optimum way of utilising this vast potential to better educate and not only inform citizens and decision-makers should be sought.

In addition to *how*, some clarity is also needed with respect to *who* is well positioned to contribute to bridging the knowledge-to-practice gap in the field of democracy promotion. The way forward is illuminated by Roper (2002, 345), who points to the importance of inter-governmental organisations, bilateral aid agencies, and prominent NGOs, and Brown et al. (2003, 96–97), who argue for the importance of the evolution of institutional bases friendly to practice–research exchange. In addition, it is important to acknowledge the significance of endogenous solutions. Many remedies for addressing local challenges – often developed by those who worked, or started working, outside of solid organisational frameworks and detached from related expert discussions – have subsequently seen global application. Democracy organisations and donors have come a long way in understanding the potential of endogenous solutions and encouraging the diffusion of democracy tools. One example was the Council of Europe event “Rewiring Democracy – Connecting Citizens and Institutions in the Digital Age” that brought together around 1,000 participants from more than 100 countries to present and discuss new tools developed worldwide to improve the state of democracy (Council of Europe 2014).

Indeed, bridging the knowledge-to-practice gap in the area of democracy promotion is the multi-dimensional scheme which includes: balanced consolidation of knowledge; careful design of institutions mandated to promote democracy; truly global networks that connect democracy researchers and practitioners; and multiplicity of forums that enable diffusion of endogenously developed democratic practices. However, in contexts where democratic culture is weak and where parts of political power structures oppose democratisation, externally supplied and endogenously developed tools prove to be indispensable means to an end for empowering democracy enthusiasts among both state and non-state actors. To further promote development of democracy tools that converge strengths of traditional and contemporary approaches, hence educate and empower on-the-ground actors, some orientation points may be useful. In line with the viewpoints presented in this article, the following practical recommendations for those with ambitions of designing, developing, or supporting development of effective democracy promotion tools are proposed.

Recommendation 1 – ensure a comprehensive knowledge base

The knowledge base should be at the heart of any tool. The guiding criteria for the consolidation of the knowledge base is comprehensiveness and practicality. This is achieved by balancing the main academic findings and debates with practitioners’ experiences and perspectives. Summarising what can be a large body of knowledge, in a way that is understandable to a broad audience, is sensitive and labour intensive work. Involving leading academics and practitioners from the Global South and North may be cost-efficient and ensure consolidation of knowledge resources in a democratic manner. The democratic landscape is a moving target for researchers and practitioners alike. To remain relevant, knowledge resource tools may require periodical updates which need to be considered in the design phase. For example, the updating of a printed handbook, digital handbook, or website may incur different costs.

Recommendation 2 – define the need and the role of training

The guiding criteria for the development of training tools may be the recognition that the straightforward application of knowledge resources is complex. Due to personal engagement and participants’ interaction, training can be used as an instrument for reconciling differences between different communities of practice or social groups, for example, state and non-state actors. Development and implementation of training tools may be a costly undertaking, and tool developers need to consider the issue of sustainability. The development of a training toolkit which, in addition to knowledge resources, includes guidance and support materials for trainers’ capacity building will allow

interested organisations to establish ownership over training tools. This will help with affordability and sustainability.

Recommendation 3 – consider assessment and analysis requirements

The importance of having actionable information in policy and decision-making processes is well known. If the tool developer's aim is to assist in building users' capacity to improve situational awareness needed for making policy and action decisions in complex and dynamic environments, then consideration should be given to the development of assessment and analysis tools. For example, improved situational awareness may relate to understanding perceptions and attitudes of citizens or specific social groups, establishing awareness about conflicts and incidents, monitoring changing power dynamics, and so on. Assessment and analysis methods should be anchored in the relevant knowledge resources. If these do not already exist, the knowledge base should be developed or consolidated specifically for the tool. Due to the complexity in implementing assessment and analysis tools, developers should consider providing training to interested users. This may imply building the training module as well. Depending on the nature of the phenomenon being addressed, developers should consider adding comparative action options which may be applicable in different contexts. If so, developers must also caution users that direct replication of good practices from one country in other contexts may cause contrary effects to those desired.

Recommendation 4 – use ICTs to strengthen traditional tools, and strengthen ICT-based tools with a knowledge base

Developers should be innovative in exploring ways to utilise ICTs in strengthening traditional tools, as well as in educating users of ICT-based tools about the phenomenon of concern. Use of digital format allows broader, faster, and cheaper dissemination of knowledge resource tools. Training can be offered as online courses for the benefit of those who may not have the resources or privilege to travel. Assessment and analysis tools can benefit from the wide use of social media, crowdsourcing, and other software applications in collecting and processing data, and presenting information. When social media and crowdsourcing tools are used to monitor and evaluate democratic processes, in particular to collect data from the broader citizenry on democratic malpractices, consideration should be given to educating users and contributors about the phenomenon of concern. This will ensure that both data collection and action are knowledge-based. Considerations should also include protection against intentional spoilers.

Recommendation 5 – ensure customisability to local contexts

Those who aim to develop tools with global applicability will need to ensure that these tools can be customised to grasp realities in divergent social contexts. For example, the comprehensiveness of knowledge resource tools may be achieved by taking a broad perspective and through the systematic mapping of factors that impact the phenomenon of concern globally. However, when such a tool is used in a narrower context, such as in a single country, only a few factors may be relevant. To ensure practicality, knowledge resource tools should be designed in a way which will allow users to understand the full magnitude of the problem, but ultimately focus on what is relevant in their context. Training tools also need to be sensitive to local specifics, such as gender, culture, language, and consider other social barriers that may exist in the contexts where training is implemented. Likewise, assessment and analysis tools need to be highly customisable to respond to users' practical needs. For example, they need to allow users to distinguish and focus on different geographical and administrative regions, to place data in different formats, and to provide different analytical, visualisation, and presentation options. Digital technologies offer a range of platforms that can be utilised

to ensure such customisability. Once customised by the user, ownership and sustainability are more likely.

Experienced researchers and practitioners may find some, even most, of these recommendations to be “putting the same old wine into a new bottle”. Nonetheless, while the author hopes that established experts will find some points of their interest, it is expected that novel tool developers – in particular those deprived of opportunities to follow the mainstream expert debates, or those working outside of progressive organisational frameworks – will find these recommendations somewhat practical and inspirational.

Conclusions

Efficient tools are at the output end of many democracy promotion initiatives implemented by international and national organisations and citizens. Broader debate and shared understanding about mechanics of different democracy promotion tools, their common denominators, strengths and weaknesses, as well as their potential to utilise ICTs can help in designing tools which are more effective in bridging the gap between knowledge and action. Such understanding may further assist donors in deciding on the type of tool that deserves their support, and help practitioners in embracing tools that match their specific needs. Although arguing that shared understanding and standardisation will be beneficial, this article does not advise imposing rigid frameworks and constraints on tool developers. Instead, the intention is to encourage innovation and the exploration of new ways, but based on an understanding of existing concepts and debates.

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