Introduction

Representative democracy is a subject of criticism in the current societal conditions of advanced Western societies, and new, "extra-formal" democratic practices are being implemented. The authority of these extra-formal democratic practices does not depend upon the usual legitimating processes, which include charters, constitutions, formal bureaucracy, and the electoral representative overhead model of democratic accountability (Bogason, Kensen, and Miller 2004, p. 5). At the local level, representative democracy may rely on a strategy of existing alongside extra-formal democracy. An alternative strategy involves trying to relate to these extra-formal practices in order to change the process. The first strategy may well mean that representative democracy will eventually become obsolete (In ‘t Veld, 2004). The second strategy leaves room for hope that representative democracy, in whatever form, will become a valued part of democratic society (Gergen 1992; Kensen 2003).

Two conditions must be met for representative democracy to relate to extra-formal democracy. First, representative democracy should not be the norm; the possible must be identified and acted upon. Second, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) should participate directly in these extra-formal democratic practices instead of leaving them to street-level bureaucrats. Because of their position as linking pins between local society, the administration and the executive board of elected officials, or the city council, CEOs can relate practices of extra-formal democracy to formal democracy well. The individual who holds a position, however, is not the only one to attach social-cultural meanings to that
position; these meanings are assigned by the CEO, others in the local network, and the societal discourse at large. As defined from a new-public-management approach, the role of the CEO differs from the CEO role as defined from a democratic-governance approach. The particular repertoires of acting, relating to citizens, and making decisions that CEOs actually put into practice within a given locality thus remain an empirical question.

In this paper, I discuss the theory of extra-formal democracy and the challenge it poses to representative democracy, and answer the question of why it is in the interest of representative democracy to accept this challenge. I then analyze two local experiments in which CEOs attempted to relate formal democracy to extra-formal democracy. These experiments took place in two different cities in the Netherlands between 2004 and 2005; they dealt with issues that challenged instrumental rationality, thereby requiring inter-agency task forces and collaboration with citizens. Finally, I use the results of this analysis to discuss the opportunities and constraints that CEOs currently face with regard to relating representative democracy to extra-formal democracy.

Changing Formal Democracy

In advanced Western societies, many citizens currently do not want standard bureaucratic solutions. Instead, they demand to have influence and an active role in public decision-making (Bogason 19??). This active citizenship was influenced by a number of trends, including the reflexive society in which citizens talk back in response to intervention policies, and the network(ed) society, in which citizens actively shape their public interests and preferences in unpredictable and therefore uncontrollable forms (Duijn 2006; Frissen 2006).

In response to these trends, efforts have been made to strengthen representative democracy at the local level. These efforts involve either transforming the structure of the formal relationship between the executive board and the city council into a dualistic system, or interaction with citizens, entrepreneurs, and professionals in the policy-making process. For these co-productive forms of policy-making, local governments invite citizens into their practices and procedures. Although such changes can lead to fierce discussions (e.g., concerning the question of whether the city council may decide to deviate from the plan that was prepared by the citizens), they do not fundamentally change formal democracy as we know it. Instead, they correct representative democracy regarding public participation and sense of community (Ringeling 2004, 64; Sørensen 2004, 129).
The structural change into dualism was implemented by law in the Netherlands in 2002. A dualistic government consists of a city council and an executive board. In a dualistic system, the task of the city council is threefold. First, the council must ensure that the implementation activities of the executive board proceed as promised. A second task of the city council is to develop new political frameworks for policy or to strengthen old ones, and a third is to represent the people. To accomplish these tasks, city council members make contact with their voters, engage in debates with each other, and present their conclusions to the executive board. It is then the task of the executive board to implement their conclusions as policy.

Before the introduction of the dualistic system, politics had been a game between the ruling parties and the opposition. In this context, the executive board had been part of the city council, and could therefore be confident of majority support for any plans it might propose.

Dualism was introduced to make local politics more interesting for both politicians and voters. Its objective was to strengthen representative democracy by giving city council members more resources for influencing policy-making and decision-taking processes. Dualism freed the council from the executive board, thus improving its ability to perform its supervisory function, at least in theory. The main responsibility of the executive board is to propose a program at the beginning of the legislative period and to implement it once it has been approved by the city council.

Instead of strengthening representative democracy, another way of responding to society’s criticism concerning the legitimacy of representative democracy involves trying to change formal democracy. To change representative democracy, local governmental actors should improve their efforts to relate and participate in citizen’s experiments with other forms of democracy (i.e., extra-formal democracy). Such interactions have the potential to change the ways in which both formal and extra-formal democracy currently work. It involves calling certainties into question and creating new working methods. The focus during the transition period is on change rather than on “new policies” or similar direct results.

Extra-Formal Democratic Practices

Part of the democracy discussion concerns the legitimacy of decisions. Formal democracy is about equality. Each citizen has one vote on Election Day. With their votes, citizens give
elected officials a mandate to make decisions on their behalf for the next four years. In turn, each elected official has one vote on each decision. This is formal democracy’s way of dividing influence: equally.

Although it occurs in a direct manner, the same rule of equality applies in deliberative democracy. In deliberative democratic rule, those who will be affected by a decision should be able to influence the decision-making process personally. A decision can be made when the participants reach consensus.

Extra-formal democracy is not necessarily based upon equality. Equality is impossible, and not even desirable, in the fragmented Western society (Frissen 2006). Instead of equality, situational diversity is the rule. In each situation, those who participate in the decision-making process decide who is in the best position to make a decision, even with regard to the organization of the decision process (Box 2002, 21). Responsibility for creating and maintaining the conditions for participating is relational; it is a joint assignment (McNamee and Gergen 1999, xi and xii). Because the process is open, extra-formal democracy must be legitimated in each situation. Legitimacy may reside in the relevance of the extra-formal democracy process to the local situation (Bogason, Kensen, and Miller 2002).

Extra-formal democracy is based upon a pragmatic point of view. Because the rules for making decisions are determined in each situation by those who are actually involved, conflict is part of the game. There is always the possibility that people will fight the way in which the process was organized, the outcome of the process, or both. From a pragmatic point of view, this generates a new situation, and people will deal with it accordingly.

The following five questions were derived from experiences with participating in extra-formal democratic practices. These questions arose sporadically, and they were discussed in a non-structured way. Although such questions are characteristic of periods in which new rules are being invented for the democratic game, the process of making them explicit may be somewhat helpful in structuring future extra-formal democratic processes. Experience has demonstrated the difficulty of inventing new rules when the existing rules are not yet clear.

1) How many people make a decision (concerning process and/or what to do next) and according to how much input (number of people and depth)?

2) How are preliminary decisions examined for approval/disapproval?

3) How well do the decision and the decision-making process fit those concerned and their situation?
4) What happens in the case of conflict? Who makes decisions then and on which basis?

5) To what extent are those involved asked about their opinions, interests, values, and contributions to the process at hand, both individually and as a group (or groups)?

Another side of the discussion about extra-formal democratic practices concerns the question of which practices deserve to be labeled “democratic,” and who makes this determination. With extra-formal democracy, it is important to consider “the possible,” because only then can democratic rules other than those of representative democracy be invented. The answer to the question above must therefore be, “It is democracy when someone claims it is democracy.” According to the democratic principle of ongoing dialogue, however, this claim can always be questioned. Democracy is thus always in the process of becoming; it never is (Chia 19??; Staniševski 2006).

Theory of Change

The theory of change that is applied here states that there must be interplay between stability and change if a group of people (and their practice) wants to stay powerful and in business. A strong internal communication process in which the rules of the game are clearly followed can be simultaneously beneficial and dangerous. The benefit is that the group members (e.g., those working at city hall) can understand each other with a single word, thereby efficiently producing their standard responses. The danger resides in the fact that it is impossible for group members to communicate externally in a manner that forces the group to reflect upon the rules of the game. These rules tell what the game is about, where it is played, who the players are, how they interact with each other, and what the time limits are.

Representative democracy as we know it has clear rules. Although some of these rules are currently a subject of criticism, neither the game nor its players allow the fundamental value of these rules of the game to be questioned. The interaction between group members of representative democracy and the public at large occurs either in terms of policy or in terms of problems. The latter refers to a situation in which the standard actors in representative democracy (i.e., elected officials and public officials) continue to wonder how the interaction fits within the rules of representative democracy. Representative democracy is the norm,
particularly when members of representative democracy participate in extra-formal
democratic process.

Two Examples

The local government of Sweet Lake City (a city near The Hague in the Netherlands) and the
council of the Old-Western district of Amsterdam\(^1\) both made it possible for active citizens to
experiment with new forms of democracy. In addition, there was at least one CEO in each
city who played a crucial role in linking formal and extra-formal democracy. In both cases,
without their strategic actions, the practices of extra-formal democracy would have
developed parallel to the daily routines of formal democracy, providing no opportunity, on
either side, to reflect upon practices and rules being followed, and to develop these practices
into new meaningful democratic forms.

Sweet Lake City

With the introduction of dualism, city councils were expected to develop and test new ways
of relating to the people. In this way, they would learn whether they should change the
political agenda (e.g., prioritize differently or add topics) and how well the executive board
implemented policy. In Sweet Lake City, the city council took such an initiative to make
contact with citizens and professionals.

At the beginning of 2004, the city council of Sweet Lake City installed a work group of council
members to address the topics of living environment and safety. Among its other activities, in
September 2004, the work group invited residents of a certain district (Buytenwegh-de
Leyens) to suggest how their living environment and safety could be improved. In October
2004, the work group had received 350 responses, each of which contained more than one
suggestion. The residents suggested improvements in a variety of areas, including the
following: traffic and safety; maintenance of public green spaces; litter; children’s
playgrounds and other public services; living together; and crime watch. These suggestions
were spread throughout the district.

In response to the few hundred suggestions, the work group wrote a letter to the executive
board asking the board to implement the suggestions. The work group considered most of
the suggestions to consist of measures that should have already been taken by the executive board. In the letter, the work group also announced that it would take a second look at the suggestions in order to see whether new topics should be formulated for the political agenda. The response of the work group was in line with the roles as defined in the law on dualism.

Had the executive board also responded as expected (i.e., “The departments of the administration will implement the suggested measures”), the communication about the suggestions could have been restricted to an exchange on paper between citizens, city council, and executive board. Because of a number of strategic actions, however, the communication became face-to-face and in a new group setting. The fact that this actually took place, instead of remaining on paper as a good plan, was due to supportive action taken by the council’s secretary (a CEO whose function it is to support and advise the city council and its political parties; in Sweet Lake City, there were seven).

I had been working with a group of public officials in Sweet Lake City to develop the method of thinking relationally. We saw the council work group’s problem as a challenge for our work. We therefore proposed considering the 350 responses in a relational way. Because the number of suggestions, the diversity of themes, and their dispersion made the suggestions difficult to manage, the members of the work group were responsive to our proposal.

Part of our proposal was to make it a trial project. We therefore made an initial selection of three themes and three locations: 1) Different life styles in a special style of living (three-story houses starting on the second floor with open parking lots on the first floor); 2) police control and law enforcement in the shopping mall; and 3) traffic and safety in front of the Annie M.G. Schmidt School.

Each theme would be discussed among stakeholders. This was part of the method of thinking relationally. Those who give shape and meaning to a public space and the way people relate to each other within public space are the ones who should discuss the problems that are experienced there and how these problems can be solved. When a number of different parties contribute to a problem, they are likely to be best able to solve the problem together. Most of the suggestions from the citizens for improving their living environment and its safety involved a need for someone else to do something about a
problematic situation: the police, the local government, youth workers, the owner of the shopping mall, or the parents who transport their children to school in their cars.

Three meetings were planned, one meeting for each theme-on-location. Each meeting was prepared by four people. The district manager and I participated in all three groups. Another public official from the social policy department and one from the physical planning department participated in each separate group. Our group thus consisted of eight people and three groups.

Each group collected relevant existing information and produced new information. They visited the locations at different times and talked to people who were living, working, shopping, walking, cycling, or parking there. We interviewed the residents who had sent suggestions to the city council work group concerning one of the three themes-on-location that were being studied, and we made a draft analysis of these data according to the questions mentioned above. We forwarded all of this information to those who had participated in the meeting.

Each of the three meetings was arranged in a similar fashion, but with different participants. The following section describes one of the meetings in more detail.

During the theme meeting, the various stakeholders used relational thinking to help explore the possibility of alternatives for building a fence around the parking lot. With this goal in mind, fourteen city council members, one executive board member, six public officials, four professionals (two from youth work/community work, and two from the housing associations), and I gathered in a school beside the houses. The residents also formed part of the group at two points during the meeting.

The meeting opened with a presentation of the information that had been gathered and the analyses that had been made. The group then walked to visit the residents and talked to them about living together. The residents had received letters earlier, informing them of the visit. After this location visit, the group returned to the school, where six residents waited to speak with the city council members. These residents had been interviewed earlier, and they now had the opportunity to tell their story to the council members in person, and to discuss possible solutions. Three youths who regularly spend time underneath the houses were also invited, but they did not attend. A youth worker was present during the evening, however, as well as a public official who had spoken with the youths one evening when they were
gathered underneath the houses. These participants related the youth’s stories. The evening ended with a discussion of possible (and perhaps more unorthodox) alternatives to a fence.

The public official who had spoken to the youths reported two important details. First, he had been surprised by the ease with which he was able to talk with the youths. Second, the youths were apparently unaware of the problems that they caused for the residents. In addition, the residents who had talked with the council members included a group of four women who were an exception to the general trend whereby residents did not go to the parking lot together to talk to the youth about the noise, litter, or damage that they caused. The story that these women told was the same as the story that was told by the public official: the youths were relatively approachable. An idea arose during the discussion to organize a residents-meeting-young-people plan that would follow the example of the four women and take the neighbors along “down under.”

This initiative would require the necessary means and support in order to become a successful project. The district manager (a public official who networks with the residents, entrepreneurs, professionals and other public officials working in and/or for the district) assumed responsibility for the further development of this project. It is important to note that this initiative could benefit from a combination of social and physical measures. The theme meeting opened up the question of exactly which physical measures would support the connection of the “underworld” with the world of the houses. The solution no longer remains, “a fence, of course.”

In conclusion, without the willingness of the council’s secretary to make the organization of the three meetings possible financially, there would not have been three processes of extra-formal democracy. After a member of the executive board had proposed that the council’s work group could deal with the hundreds of suggestions by means of thinking relationally, she did not want to invest additional funds into organizing the process. The district manager and I, as a researcher, then contacted the council’s secretary to investigate whether he could help us make the process possible after all.

Although the council’s secretary was the defining link in the chain that made the extra-formal democratic processes happen, he was not the only relational leader in the situation. The “thinking-relationally” project had been established by a public official who had also engaged my services as a researcher to assist this project. Without this public official, the alternative proposal to deal with the hundreds of suggestions would not have existed. Finally, also in my
capacity as a researcher, I worked along with the other participants in the difficult task of organizing good theme meetings. Flyvbjerg (2001) refers to this process as “science on the body.” One of the things that I experienced “on the body” was that thinking relationally requires a great deal of relation management. So many things and people are connected to each public space, and all of their relationships must be organized if collective action is to occur. This collective action is not the work of one municipal leader, but of the collective. A limited number of participants play a decisive role in linking important parties to one another, though. Those who play this role can be defined only in retrospect, however, once it has become clear whether actors collaborated in being linked to one another.

The Old-Western district of Amsterdam

In the Old-Western district of Amsterdam, citizens and entrepreneurs, including artists, craftspeople, and shopkeepers, could apply for funds to improve their street or neighborhood socially, physically, and economic. In ten localities within the district, citizens and entrepreneurs organized their own decision-making processes. These ten different processes, which produced a variety of results, could have occurred within the public space of the citizens, the entrepreneurs, the project leader (a public official of the district administration), and the formal committees that approved the citizens’ plans. Because of actions of the district’s secretary (a CEO responsible for the administrative organization and adviser of the executive board of elected officials), however, the project leader was allowed to contact as many different public officials as was necessary to support and implement the plans that had been made by the citizens and entrepreneurs. This allowed the democratic processes in the streets to have an impact on the formal district democracy, particular with regard to the way in which public officials address citizens and entrepreneurs.
References

Bogason, P., 19

Box, R. 2002

Chia, R. 19


Ringeling, A. 2004

Staniševski, 2006


Veld, R.J. in ’t, 2004,

1 The city of Amsterdam is divided into thirteen districts. Each district has its own district council, executive board, and administration. In addition to the district councils, Amsterdam has a city council, which is chaired by the mayor (who is appointed by the queen). The district councils have a fair number of tasks, authorities, and obligations.