The Promise of E–Democracy and the Internet: Myths about Digital Agoras?

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Abstract

The advance of digital technology in the field of politics in the last 20 years has raised expectations about enhancing the potential of the long dominant model of representative democracy. The need to reinvigorate the overall political process has been talked about since the first signs of a decline in civic engagement in the second half of the twentieth century. In the meantime, technological gadgets, and, especially the great versatility of Internet applicability have indeed contributed to better communication between political elites and their people and for sharing information on an unprecedented scale. Yet, the key challenge still seems barely to be touched upon: how to provide the meaningful participation of politically awakened individuals in decision-making processes within states. In this chapter we offer a brief survey of the European and United States achievements in the field of e-voting and Internet-voting in order to show how political, technical and security concerns still prevail in debates thereby undermining trust in the new modes of casting votes. Also, we present the results of the survey carried out with 120 students in the Republic of Macedonia and their considerations about the eventual possibility of Internet voting in the country. By applying descriptive and analytical methods, we would argue that the immense possibilities for using the Internet in politics are far from being fully exploited, so any initial miscalculation or failures should not discourage communities from observing new pathways for improving the unavoidable digital component of democracy.

Keywords: Internet, digital technology, e-democracy, e-voting, citizens.

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Introduction

Debates about the inherent limits of democracy (Crozier, Huntington & Watanuki, 1973) and a decline of the West as the prime promotor of this political system have been occasionally circulated by the prominent authors in the past (Spengler, 1926). One of the biggest concerns is the ever decreasing number of citizens who are part of the political processes which directly correlates with a decline in the membership of civic networks (Putnam, 1995). Despite the fact that in the meantime no other type of political system has been elevated to the level of a systemic challenger, the future shape of democracy is uncertain. According to some scholars two juxtaposed trends are important: first, a slow, but, steady loosening of the links between citizens and institutions which provokes the crisis of democratic legitimacy and accountability, and secondly, the rise of digital information and communication technologies (ICT) as a potential tool for amending some of the shortages in democracy (Coleman & Gotze, 2001, pp. 4-5).

Throughout political history it has been seen as being necessary to narrow the gap between the electorate and the elected politicians. As time went by, it started growing into the biggest obstacle for overcoming the democratic deficit. Almost twenty years ago the British economist Frances Cairncross (1997) wrote about the "the death of distance" where she forcefully elaborated the impact of telecommunications and the Internet on our lives and society. The United Nations identified a strong empirical correlation between a country's information and communication technology (ICT) diffusion index and its income and the human development level as measured by the United Nations Development Program (Prasad, 2013, p. 189). The Digital Revolution and its by-product the Information Society brought about changes in the way how people communicate with each other and with their political representatives (Rostiashvili, 2012, p. 11). Nowadays, the phenomenon described more than a decade ago as cyber or netpolitik is familiar virtually to everyone. It is certainly not true that netpolitik, unlike realpolitik, deals only with moral legitimacy and societal values, however, the assumption is that after the agricultural revolution that concerned the quantity of food, and the industrial revolution which was fueled by the quantity of capital, we are now witnessing the information revolution that is truly changing the world with regard to the quantity of information. (Bollier, 2003, pp. 2-3).

World Wide Web and Democratic Deficit

As with many other buzzwords in the social sciences e-democracy is a commonly used term, but, it comes with a very wide range of meanings. Definitions extend from a minimalist one in which citizens have electronic access to government information and interact with government officials and a more substantial one, where e-democracy implies a more active involvement of citizens and their ability, either directly or through their representatives, to govern themselves and their communities (Noris in Tuzzi et al., 2007, p. 33). Anyhow, a number of definitions uphold that e-democracy involves the use of ICT in support of the democratic decision-making processes. Obviously, the key component is how and to what level citizens are engaged. In this regard the OECD report identifies three approaches: firstly, information, as a one-way relationship in which government delivers information to the citizens; secondly, consultation, or a two-way correlation in which citizens provide feedback to the government and thirdly, active participation whereby citizens are engaged in defining the process and content of policy making. In spite of their proposed equal standing in setting the agenda, responsibility for the final decision should, nevertheless rest with the government (Macintosh, 2004, pp. 1-2).

Considering the effects of the nascent forms of direct democracy related to the World Wide Web, the most evident one is situated in the area of information exchange. Haider is right to highlight the power of the Internet as an "information enabler" (2009, p. 1). But, more information does not necessarily imply higher quality in the decision-making process since the conditions for transforming information into political action have to be in set place beforehand (Dijk, 2013, pp. 6-7). If the technology stays as the sole enabler in the field, it certainly is not going to provide the solution for the modern challenges of democracy. In order to have better access to information and, even more, to amplify the effects of using ICT through consultation and public participation, one report proposes the integration of the traditional offline with new online tools (OECD, 2003, p. 9).

The crucial challenge is to go beyond the traditional one-way model of service delivery from the government to the citizens and to use feedback from the people through digital media. As Coleman plainly put it: instead of citizens simply paying their taxes online, they would be better able to participate in a public debate about how their taxes are spent (Coleman & Gotze, 2001, p. 5). But, the problem is exactly this; participation is "highly problematic" whenever it comes to the concrete implementation of models, because participation

should not be an end in itself (Tuzzi et al., 2007, p. 34). The peoples' voices should not only be heard, but, more importantly, taken into account.

Supporters of digital democracy are sure that all the gaps of modern democracy can be filled by the use of ICT and in due course "facilitate a quantum leap" in democracy (Backer in Rostiashvili, 2012, p. 12). While recognizing the role of ICT in today's politics we are still at some distance from the point when the participation of citizens in decision-making processes will be substantial (Rostiahsvili, 2012, p. 13). Many scholars would agree that the major problem of democratic reform is how to sustain the mass deliberation of citizens and incorporate it into the political process (OECD, 2003, p. 28). One model for doing this is by combining the top-down perspective - citizens' access to information and their reaction to government-led initiatives and the bottom-up perspective, whereby the people "emerge as producers, rather than just as consumers of policy" (Macintosh in OECD, 2003, pp. 29-30).

The Internet: A Panacea or Just a Tool?

Perhaps like no other global medium in history the Internet triggered polarized views about its potential, influence and limits concerning the engagement of citizens and their connection with public policies. Arguments are divided about the "good" versus the "bad" effects of Internet usage. On one side of the rift there are those who believe that the Internet leads to more intensive and better social relations by adding another channel of communication, while others argue that Internet use can be socially isolating since the time spent on the web is often taken at the expense of other social activities, including political ones. This "displacement model" indicates the zero-sum effect with the time on Internet allegedly reducing the period available for face-to–face social activities (Nie & Hillygus, 2002, p. 2). Or to reformulate the thesis, using the words of Nie and Erbring: "the more time they spend using the Internet the more they lose contact with their social environment" (2002, p. 5).

The very notion of information being able to flow unrestricted over borders is splitting people into two categories: cyber-libertarians and cyber-utopians (Gaser et al., 2014, p. 123). In the first group, there are those who are convinced that the power of the Internet should soon mark the end of state sovereignty and the rise of a specific subtype of "information sovereignty". In their view, technology has given citizens a chance to leave political communities based on geography and join digital communities based on shared interests. On the other side, cyber-utopians are emphasizing the still unchallenged state

control over the physical telecommunication infrastructure and quote the recent study that over a third of all Internet users have experienced some form of filtering (Gaser et al., 2014, p. 128). Similar arguments, at times, followed by oversimplification are observable in discussions between the so-called digital enthusiasts and digital sceptics. Enthusiasts are confident that computer networks will contribute to more informed citizens and increase their political participation and impact by a simple click of the mouse. The extreme view among them is the belief that the Internet is changing the balance of power between citizens and the "power barons" and soon will make legislatures and other governmental bodies irrelevant, thereby allowing for a direct democracy (Levine in Hayduk & Mattson, 2002, p. 121). Grossman had even put forward the utopian idea about the "electronic republic" where government decision-making from the few in the power centers will be extended to the many like in the city-states of ancient Greece (Levine in Hayduk & Mattson, 2002, p. 122).

Some scholars demonstrate that the level of penetration of the Internet leads to higher levels of democracy; others warn that the web might have an adverse effect on democratization because the Internet empowers not only citizens, but also, governments to "monitor their people better and prevent free speech", as well (Best & Wade, 2009). In the past decade a public perception has been created that the Internet is a force for democratic change based on its perceived role in the popular uprisings in the world starting from the "color revolutions" in the Soviet successor states and ending with the Arab Spring. However, the loyal supporters of this thesis do not take into account the subsequent course of development in the same countries when authoritarian tendencies backfired in spite of unhindered access to the Internet (Faris & Etling, 2008, pp.65-66). What is beyond doubt is that the Internet does possess specific "generative possibilities" to bring people together for conversation, commerce, political engagement or action (Zittrain, 2008, p. 148).

In this context it is important to differentiate between the two dimensions of the effect of the Internet over political processes: horizontal within the government, and vertical when citizens interact with one another and with the government. Whilst the Internet offers new lines of communication between the citizenry and the authorities, it is not as good in improving processes among government institutions (Faris & Etling, pp. 65-66). The situation is worse in the case of authoritarian leaders who obstruct free speech and democratic movements with the same rigor - online as off line. Of course, democratic governments behave differently, so judging the impact of the Internet is always attached to the specific context in the democratic polity.

Basically, it is safe to say that in all instances the Internet should be considered as a politically neutral tool at the disposal of dictators and democrats alike (Faris & Etling, pp. 70-80).

In principle, social media do offer innovative opportunities for political actors, political institutions and for the public to interact with one another (Clarke, 2010, p. 1). Potential political benefits from the use of the social media are: the fostering of greater pluralism in political discourse; enabling citizens to become more effective political actors; building trust in public institutions and politicians; helping legislators to better represent citizens and governments to better serve public needs. In the group of potential risks the most prominent is the danger of constructing the so-called surveillance state which would allow the people in power to breach privacy rights *en masse* (Clarke, 2010, pp. 4-9). In the not so distant year of 1984 Barber alerted us to the fact that the use of technology could easily weaken the sense of face-to-face cooperation or confrontation and increase the danger of elite manipulation (1984).

E-voting: Capabilities and Legitimacy

A minimal definition of e-voting is the use of electronic means to mark a ballot paper, while Internet voting is electronic voting which involves casting a ballot via the Internet (Goldsmith, 2013). An umbrella definition would be that E-voting embraces casting a ballot via a broad range of electronic telecommunications technology, including the Internet, mobile phones, cable and satellite television and computers without internet connection (Gibson, 2001, p. 564). If Internet voting is a sub-genre of electronic voting, then, what is the demarcation line between the two? Electronic voting is performed by the computers installed in polling stations, not connected to any network, while Internet voting is executed in an unsupervised environment (Caporusso, 2010, p. 55). In most cases, e-voting in both forms is applied in the two crucial procedural phases: when casting and when counting the votes (Al-Khouri, 2012, p. 26).

Since 1982, voting by electronic machines on the European continent was used for legally binding elections, but, despite the increased interest it is still not widespread (McGaley & Gibson, 2006, p. 2). It was in use in Ireland and the Netherlands, but, in both states was revoked by the political parties concerned due to a low level of public confidence in the technology. Switzerland, the UK, Spain, Portugal and Italy have promoted limited trials without the legal effects; Belgium and France are in the process of deploying electronic machines (Caporusso, 2010, p. 55). Internet voting on a global level was applied for the first

time in 2000 in the official political elections in the USA, as a pilot project in several states aimed at the overseas voters. Since then, dozens of other countries have been through the same experience. Estonia in 2005 became the first country in the world to organize nation–wide elections when voters were offered the alternative of casting their vote over the Internet (Breuer, 2006, p. 2). Estonia is still leading the field since the country had already in its portfolio several nation-wide elections conducted via the Internet in the past 10 years. In other parts of the world, the United Arab Emirates developed their advanced I-voting system with biometric smart cards (Al-Khouri, 2012, p. 25); Australia, Canada, France, Mexico and Switzerland use Internet voting in parts of their territories; India and Norway have attempted a few trials; Finland, the UK and the USA have exercised pilot projects, but, decided not to continue: the Netherlands and Spain have had a few successful years of e-voting, but, they have interrupted their practices (Goldsmith, 2013). In all the countries mentioned the Internet voting system is used as a supplementary channel to traditional ones for casting the vote.

In general, electronic voting is distributed more in Europe than in the USA but, the fact is that almost everywhere a certain level of skepticism about this voting mode continues to persist (McGaley & Gibson, 2006, p. 3). According to the Council of Europe Recommendations, the pre-requisites for integrity and public trust in e-voting are few, but rigid in their scope; namely: secure, reliable and efficient processes, which are technically robust, open to independent verification and easily accessible to voters (CoE, 2004). As the past experience of Estonia has testified, the I-voting system should not have had a high level of legitimacy if not trustworthiness on three critical levels: political/ legal legitimacy; voters' transparency; and system transparency (Maaten & Hall, 2008, p. 32). Another role-model to be followed was developed by Switzerland where all main factors were put in place: support at the highest level by the relevant political actors; a gradual approach and the involvement of multidisciplinary teams tackling personal data information, system security, sociological aspects and organizational questions (Chevallier et al., 2006, p. 55). In the same context, of especial importance are two lessons from the Netherlands: first, once trust in the voting system is lost it is difficult to win it back, secondly, if e-voting is well implemented in any particular country it does not mean that it is always suitable for others (Loeber, 2008, p. 29). Finally, inextricably linked with the trust complex is the so – called digital divide, particularly visible in the rural areas. About its sub-layer, digital literacy polling in Switzerland has rightly voiced concerns over the fact that only two thirds of the Swiss electorate are experienced Internet users (Gasser, 2010, p. 5).

Traditional vs. New Voting Practices: Pros and Cons

Some authors optimistically announced that electronic voting would have a "revolutionizing effect on democracy" by reducing costs and limiting errors made by voters and the administrations. But, more importantly, they argue that virtually unlimited access to online information will empower voters to construct a more informed opinion and eventually make a more qualified choice (Caporusso, 2010, p. 56). On the other side of the pool are the "old fashioned" experts who tend to see online voting as a kind of "betrayal" of traditional voting practices which, allegedly, serves only to increase the social isolation of citizens (Caporusso, 2010, p. 56). The truth is that if the system is well accepted by voters and candidates it can be cost effective, deliver faster and more reliable results and be a "greener" option to the casting of the ballot (Mellet, 2010, p. 3). Furthermore, the most valuable potential of information technology in democracy would be to strengthen the public sphere by multiplying "information resources, channels of communication and the networking capacity" for national and international policy groups and political parties (Norris, 2002, p. 2).

Studies show that Internet voting underperformed regarding the expectations that this technology would increase voter turnout. The empirical data is unambiguous: the existing literature on the subject either did not test this hypothesis, or indicated that I-voting is not contributing to the level of turnout (Oostveen & Besselaar, 2009, pp. 357-358). A similar conclusion is given in the report of the UK Cabinet Office which precisely states that electronic voting will not solve the problem of the voter turnout (in Oostveen & Besselaar, pp. 372). So far, the most comprehensive overview in this regard is offered by Pippa Norris who compared 70 national elections in the 1990s in 25 post-industrial societies with the established tradition of political rights and civil liberties. Her main conclusion is that dependent on the context, this type of voting could even be negatively associated with the turnout (Norris, 2002, p. 9). In other words, the electoral turnout is not related to the method of voting, but, much more to the viable policy alternatives and the quality of the candidates on the ballot (Norris, 2002, p. 7). Lastly, one European study suggested that the driving forces for Internet voting are not age, gender, income level, education or political affiliation, but, mainly the confidence of the people in the new technology and in one's own computing skills (Chevallier, 2006, p. 61). Some surveys present one further intriguing fact: those mostly in favor of electronic elections are the people who are already politically mobilized (Kenski, 2005).

Survey – Sample, Results and Discussion

A survey was carried out in 2014 in Skopje with 120 university students aged 20-22 years, 69 females and 51 males (see Table1)(Fig. 1) (Fig. 2). Most of them (94) reside in the capital Skopje or in cities with more than of 5,000 inhabitants, the remaining 25 came from communities with less than 5,000 people (Fig. 3). The predominant number (110) came from families with above the national income average per capita in the Republic of Macedonia, and only 10 students were below that threshold (Fig. 4). The large majority of students (101 students or 84% of those surveyed) were active on the Internet on average (at least one hour per day online) or more, only 19 were below that average or not connected at all. (Fig. 5)

Skepticism towards voting online is evident among those examined since 55.8% are against this voting mode to be applied in their country (see Table 2)(Fig. 6). Their most cited arguments were: weak technical support and infrastructure at the national level; little or no access to the Internet in rural areas; elements of the electorate who are ignorant of ICT; the danger of proxy voting, especially within families; and the possibilities of hacking the program and thus altering the election outcome.

Students in favor (44.2%) emphasize easy access to the network and the convenience of voting for the elderly, disabled and people in the diaspora; the avoidance of tense situations and violence in polling stations; the faster and cheaper counting of votes; the neutrality of the Internet as a tool, as opposed to many individuals involved in the election administration; increasing voter turnout among the young generations.

Responses within the four categories (gender; residence; income; and Internet activity) do not demonstrate any statistically significant deviation from the main framework of the survey's results (Fig. 7, 8, 9 & 10).

Conclusion

The Athenian agora in a modern guise should not be contemplated as the only point of departure because the original was neither democratic nor inclusive (Coleman in OECD, p. 148). If the goal is to enhance democracy by using ICT, then we should analyze the promise of the Internet through its two competing mechanisms: first, it definitively enables an infinitive range of ideas and perspectives, secondly, people almost naturally tend to "balkanize" creating numerous online communities which are not mutually connected (Levine in

Haydok & Mattson, 2002). One research study even indicates that the use of ICT in the public sector might strengthen existing power relations instead of "deinstitutionalization" or institutional renewal to get institutional adjustment (Homburg, 2005, p. 496). It is too optimistic to say that ICT nowadays is becoming increasingly relevant for political systems, but it does pose a challenge to the model of representative democracy and to a certain extent, is opening the space for the more intensive horizontal exchange of information and participation of individuals (Tuzzi, Padovani & Nesti, p. 32).

If it is not feasible to "merge the spirit of ancient Athens with the technology of the twenty–first century" when everyone will communicate with each other (Hilbert, 2007, p. 38), what is attainable? It is safe to say that direct democracy is out of reach since it is not sufficient to have only technical possibilities to connect the people. At the same time, direct control, influence or manipulation by the authorities cannot be ruled out (Hilbert, 78). What is evident in the world today is the rise of a new information class of individuals and organizations that are well equipped and trained to gathering, presenting and at times, if necessary, manipulating information (Schonberger, Lazer). The winning strategy would be to build on the emerging new, hybrid types of democracy which combine the virtual and real political engagement of the people (Zuniga et al. 2010, p. 45). It goes without saying that we are already witnessing the decentralization of power stimulated by plurality in electronic information networks (Hilbert, 49). A quick and radical shift from a representative to an Internet-based democracy is not likely in the foreseeable future, but, the mixed model of democracy with elements of both, is certainly in the making (Anttiroiko, 2003, p. 127).

Regarding e-voting with all the formidable challenges of a technical and political character in the future, it is not surprising that the number of countries experimenting with it is still marginal. Even world leaders like Estonia are taking an incremental rather than a revolutionary approach (Spucher, Haenni & Dubius, 2010, p. 270). The traditional voting systems are not going to disappear for years to come, but, the processes of advancing digital democracy and its component, e-voting are irreversible. The future of democracy would belong to the "smart mobs", consisting of people who do not know each other, but, are able to act together in shaping responses to the fundamental questions confronting our civilization (Rheingold, 2002, p. 191).

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Tables

Table 1. Social Profile of Students

Social profile of students		Examinees	Percentage
Gender	Male	51	43%
	Female	69	57%
Total		120	100%
Residence	Urban areas	94	78%
	Rural areas	26	22%
Total		120	100%
Income level	Above national average	110	92%
	Below national average	10	8%
Total		120	100%
Internet activity	Average	101	84%
	Below average	19	16%
Total		120	100%

Table 2. Question "Are you in favor of online voting in your country?"

Distribution of examinees		Yes		No	
		Number of examinees	Percentage	Number of examinees	Percentage
Gender	Male	28	23 %	23	19 %
	Female	36	30%	33	28 %
Total		64	53 %	56	47 %
Residence	Urban areas	54	45%	40	33%
	Rural areas	14	12%	12	10%
Total		68	57%	52	33%
Income level	Above national	63	53%	47	39%
	Below national	5	4%	5	4%
Total		68	57%	52	43%
Internet activity	Average	57	47 %	44	37. %
	Below average	11	9%	8	7 %
Total		68	56 %	52	44 %

Figures

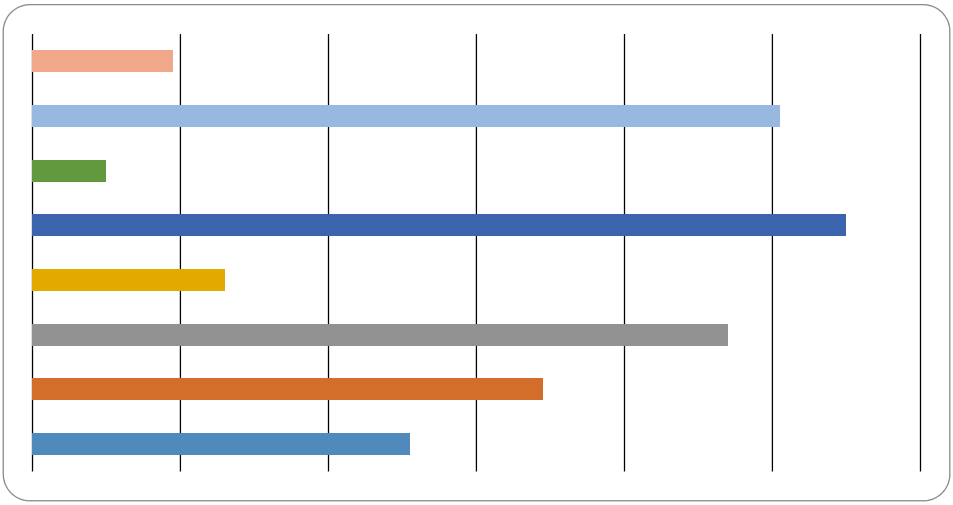

Fig. 1 – Visual representation of Table 1 – social structure of the examinees

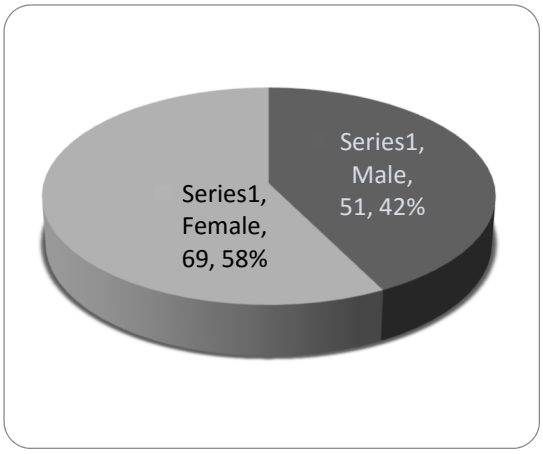

Fig. 2. Distribution by gender

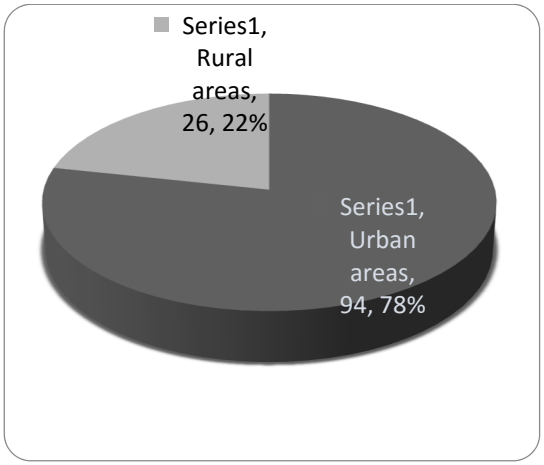

Fig. 3. Distribution by residence

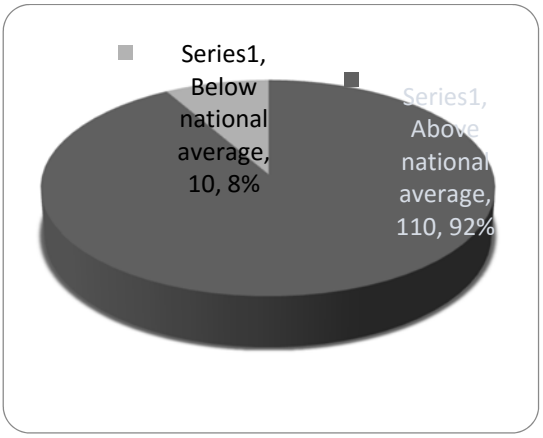

Fig. 4. Distribution by income level

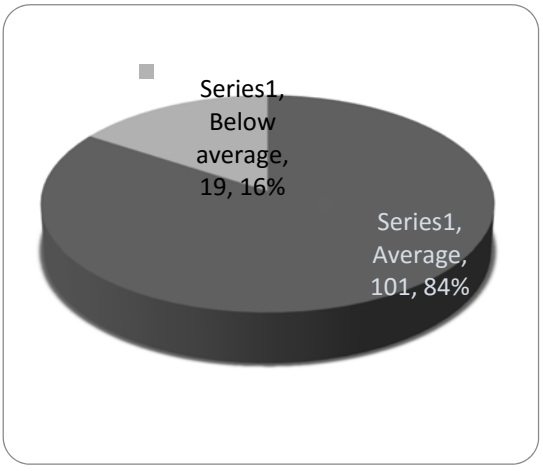

Fig. 5. Distribution by internet activity

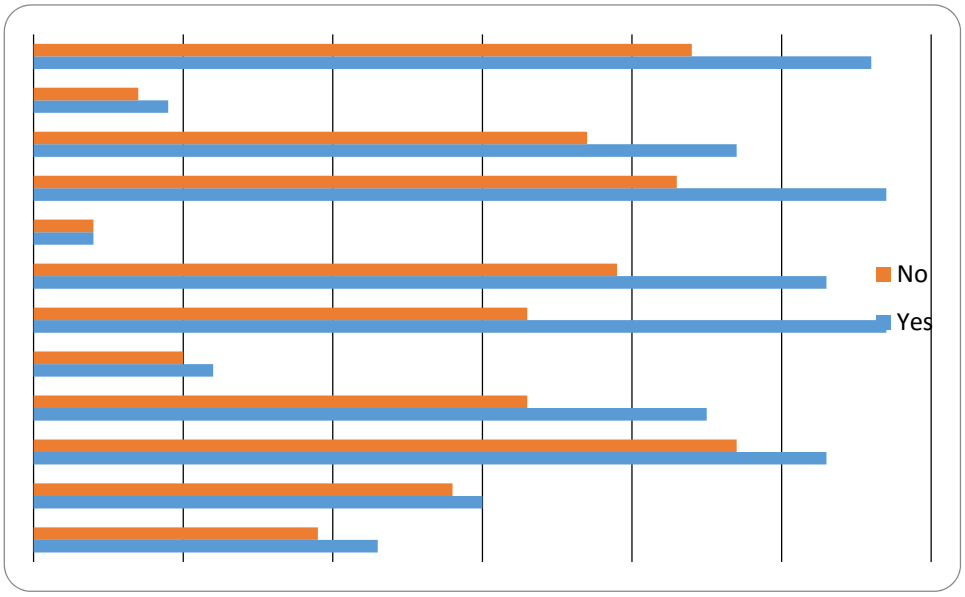

Fig. 6 – Visual representation of Table 2 – social structure of the examinees per answer

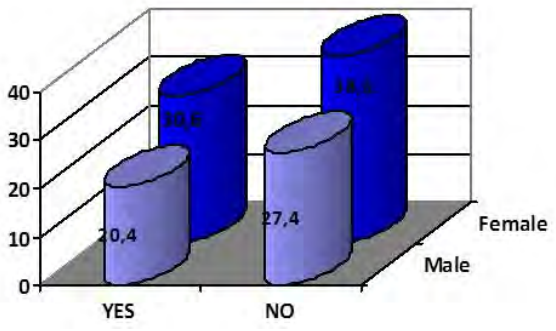

Fig. 7. Distribution of the examinees by gender

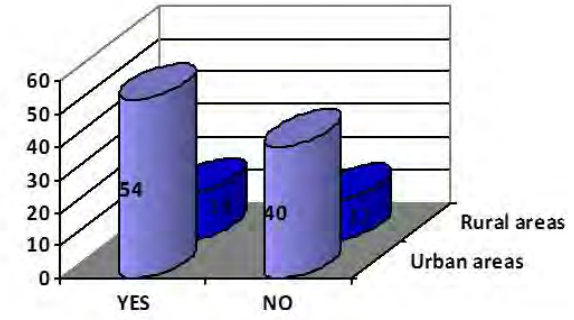

Fig. 8. Distribution of the examinees by residence

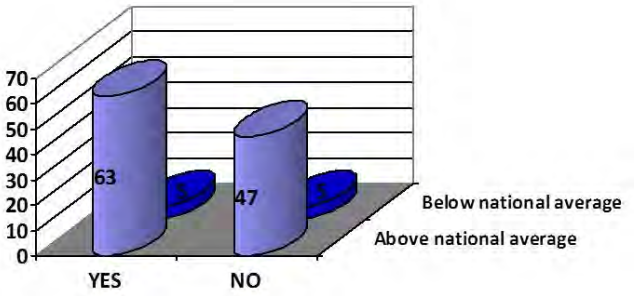

Fig. 9. Distribution of the examinees by income level

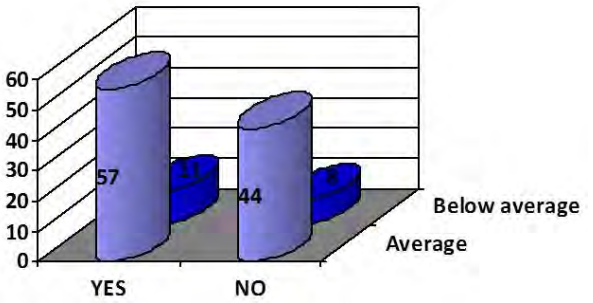

Fig. 10. Distribution of examinees by internet activity