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REFRAMING ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY: A CONCEPTUAL DEMARCATION THROUGH FRAME ANALYSIS

The study addresses the conceptual ambiguity surrounding electronic democracy by examining its relationship with a range of closely related concepts, including digital democracy, cyber democracy, virtual democracy, online democracy, and networked democracy. The research aims to establish clear definitional boundaries through the application of frame analysis as a method of semantic modelling. A corpus of academic publications published between 2010 and 2024 was analysed using inductive coding, categorization of interpretative frames, and comparative conceptual analysis. The findings demonstrate that concepts frequently treated as synonymous are grounded in distinct semantic structures reflecting different interpretations of the relationship between technology, democratic institutions, and citizen participation. Electronic democracy is conceptualized as a higher-order multidimensional framework integrating these perspectives without being reducible to any single one of them. The proposed conceptual demarcation enhances analytical precision, reduces the risk of conceptual stretching, and provides a more consistent basis for future theoretical and empirical research on digitally mediated democratic governance.

Keywords: *electronic democracy, terminological diversity, frame analysis, conceptual demarcation, umbrella concept.*

JEL classification: *D72, D83, Z13.*

РЕФРЕЙМІНГ ЕЛЕКТРОННОЇ ДЕМОКРАТІЇ: КОНЦЕПТУАЛЬНА ДЕМАРКАЦІЯ НА ОСНОВІ ФРЕЙМ-АНАЛІЗУ

Статтю присвячено уточненню концептуальних меж електронної демократії в умовах зростаючої термінологічної множинності досліджень цифрових форм політичної участі. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена поширенням значної кількості споріднених понять, зокрема цифрова демократія, кібердемократія, віртуальна демократія, онлайн-демократія та мережева демократія, які часто використовуються як взаємозамінні попри відмінності в їхніх теоретичних засадах та аналітичних акцентах. Така ситуація породжує концептуальну невизначеність, ускладнює порівняльні дослідження та знижує аналітичну цінність категорії електронної демократії.

Метою статті є встановлення чітких дефініційних меж електронної демократії шляхом систематизації споріднених понять, виявлення їхніх семантичних особливостей та визначення місця електронної демократії у структурі відповідного концептуального поля. Методологічною основою дослідження виступає фрейм-аналіз у трактуванні Р. Ентмана, який використано як інструмент реконструкції смислових структур та виявлення домінантних способів інтерпретації демократичних процесів в умовах цифрової трансформації. Емпіричну базу становить корпус наукових та аналітичних джерел 2010–2024 рр., присвячених цифровим формам демократії та громадянської участі.

У результаті дослідження встановлено, що кожне із розглянутих понять ґрунтується на окремому

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семантичному фреймі: технологічної оптимізації, цифрової публічної сфери, процедурної віртуалізації, комунікаційного інтерфейсу або мережевої самоорганізації. Показано, що термінологічне різноманіття відображає не лише мовні відмінності, а й різні уявлення про взаємозв'язок технологій, інститутів та громадянської участі. Обґрунтовано, що електронна демократія не є синонімом жодного з розглянутих понять, а виступає парасольковою категорією – інтегративною концептуальною конструкцією вищого рівня, яка поєднує кілька взаємопов'язаних вимірів цифрової політичної участі.

Наукова новизна дослідження полягає у здійсненні системної демаркації споріднених концептів електронної демократії на основі фреймового підходу, що дозволяє підвищити концептуальну чіткість, уникнути явища «розтягування понять» та створити підґрунтя для більш послідовних теоретичних і прикладних досліджень цифрових демократичних практик.

Ключові слова: *електронна демократія, термінологічна множинність, фрейм-аналіз, концептуальна демаркація, парасолькова категорія.*

Problem statement. The conceptualization of electronic democracy remains characterized by a high degree of categorical plurality, which leads to terminological ambiguity and analytical inconsistency. In contemporary public administration discourse, multiple overlapping concepts, such as digital democracy, cyber democracy, virtual democracy, online democracy, and networked democracy, are often used interchangeably, despite reflecting different underlying assumptions and analytical focuses.

This polycategorical expansion results in what Giovanni Sartori defined as «conceptual stretching», where the extension of a concept grows without sufficient clarification of its intension [1, p. 1036]. As a consequence, the analytical utility of the concept diminishes, limiting its applicability for comparative research and empirical operationalization. Under these conditions, the lack of clear definitional boundaries of electronic democracy creates not only theoretical confusion but also risks of misinterpretation in policy design and evaluation.

Analysis of recent researches and publications. The term «electronic democracy» emerged in the late 1990s alongside the diffusion of the Internet and digital communication technologies. Since then, the conceptual field has significantly expanded.

Existing research demonstrates considerable variation in the conceptualization of digitally mediated democratic practices. Although many of the underlying phenomena overlap, different strands of scholarship employ distinct terms that emphasize different dimensions of citizen–state interaction.

For instance, S. Berg and J. Hofmann [2] examine digital democracy primarily in relation to technological infrastructures and platform-based participation, illustrating one influential conceptual perspective in the literature, whereas J. T. Fajemisin [3] and A. Nugroho [4, p. 5] associate cyber democracy with the Internet's role as a new public sphere that enables political self-organization. A. N. Huda and E. Z. Rusfian [5] use the notion of virtual democracy to describe the full digitalization of democratic procedures, whereas in the work of Y. Breindl and P. Francq [6], online democracy is used in a more descriptive sense, primarily denoting digital communication channels. Finally, decentralized and horizontal forms of participation extending beyond traditional institutional frameworks are conceptualized as networked democracy in the works of E. H. Diniz and M. M. Ribeiro [7] and B. D. Loader and D. Mercea [8].

However, these terms are rarely used in a consistent or clearly differentiated manner. In many cases, they function as interchangeable labels rather than analytically distinct concepts, which contributes to increasing conceptual ambiguity within the field. This inconsistency indicates not only terminological diversity, but also the absence of a shared analytical framework for distinguishing between these concepts. As a result, the existing literature still lacks a coherent analytical framework for systematically demarcating electronic democracy from related concepts through the reconstruction of their underlying semantic structure.

The aim of this study is to establish clear definitional boundaries of electronic democracy through the semantic demarcation of related concepts and the identification of their semantic distinctions. The analysis is based on the assumption that electronic democracy constitutes a broader conceptual category encompassing several analytically distinct forms of digitally mediated democratic practice. Accordingly, the study systematizes the conceptual field, reconstructs the underlying analytical frames, and positions electronic democracy within a structured hierarchy of related concepts.

The methodological basis of the study. The study employs Robert Entman's frame analysis as the principal methodological approach. Frame analysis is used as a tool for semantic modelling that enables the reconstruction of interpretative structures embedded in scientific concepts. The empirical material consists of academic and analytical publications (2010–2024), which were examined through inductive coding, categorization of semantic frames, and comparative conceptual analysis.

The main results of the research. The application of frame analysis in this study rests on the assumption that scientific concepts are not merely terminological labels but structured systems of meaning. Consequently, conceptual definitions can be analysed as interpretative frames that reveal different understandings of the relationship between technology, democracy, and citizen participation. The research is based on a corpus of academic and analytical sources (2010–2024), including works by scholars such as Andrew Chadwick [10], Manuel Castells [11], and Jan van Dijk [12].

For the purposes of this study, the most heuristically appropriate approach is frame analysis as conceptualized by Robert Entman. According to Entman, framing involves selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicative text, in order to

promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. In this sense, a "frame" can be understood as a cognitive structure that shapes the interpretation of a phenomenon by directing attention toward particular aspects of reality and organizing the relationships between them [9, p. 52].

Applied to the context of this research, frame analysis treats conceptual definitions as carriers of structured semantic patterns that reflect different ways of understanding democracy under conditions of digital transformation. This perspective makes it possible to examine concepts such as electronic democracy, digital democracy, and networked democracy etc. as analytically distinct constructs, revealing the assumptions, priorities, and normative orientations embedded in their use.

The choice of Entman's framework is particularly appropriate because it conceptualizes frames as cognitive schema that organize meaning, thereby providing a coherent basis for the systematic reconstruction and conceptual differentiation of competing definitions of democracy in the digital age. Although frame analysis is widely applied to examine ideological and political framing in public discourse, its analytical potential extends beyond this domain. In the present study, it is employed to reconstruct the semantic organization of scientific concepts and to identify the interpretive structures embedded in their conceptual definitions. This provides the methodological basis for the conceptual demarcation undertaken in this study.

The selection of frame analysis over alternative approaches is equally deliberate. Content analysis effectively identifies lexical patterns and frequencies but provides only limited insight into the internal semantic organization of concepts and the relationships among their constituent elements. Discourse analysis, in turn, offers valuable insights into ideological and power-related dimensions but places greater emphasis on contextual interpretation than on the systematic differentiation of conceptual meanings.

By contrast, frame analysis enables the systematic reconstruction of conceptual relationships while remaining sensitive to the cognitive and normative dimensions embedded in conceptual definitions. These characteristics make it particularly well suited to the task of conceptual demarcation pursued in this study.

The analytical procedure includes:

1) inductive coding of recurring semantic elements;
2) categorization into generalized interpretative frames;
3) formalization of each concept using a unified scheme;
4) comparative interpretation of similarities and differences between frames.

This approach allows conceptual terms to be analyzed not as lexical units, but as carriers of distinct meaning structures.

The results of the frame analysis are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparative semantic frames of electronic democracy-related concepts

Term	Central Frame	Core Focus	Key Features	Normative Orientation
Digital democracy	Infrastructure-technological	Digital systems, open data, platforms	Scalability, efficiency, modernization	Optimization of governance through digital innovation
Cyber democracy	Cyberspace as a public sphere	Internet as a space of freedom and self-expression	Autonomy, decentralization, alternative structures	Emergence of political subjectivity beyond traditional institutions
Virtual democracy	Full procedural digitalization	Online implementation of all democratic processes	Speed, convenience, elimination of offline components	Rationalization of politics and everyday democratization
Online democracy	Internet as a communication channel	Tools for interaction and feedback	Interactivity, accessibility, interface-based engagement	Reduction of participation barriers and improved communication
Networked democracy	Self-organization through networks	Citizen cooperation beyond formal institutions	Crowdsourcing, deliberation, disintermediation	Post-institutional participation and collective agency

Source: the analysis is based on selected sources [2–8; 10–20].

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that concepts frequently treated as synonymous are in fact grounded in distinct semantic frames, each highlighting a particular dimension of digitally mediated democratic processes.

The analysis demonstrates that each related concept is structured around a specific dominant frame:

- technological optimization (digital democracy),
- digital public sphere (cyber democracy),
- procedural virtualization (virtual democracy),
- communication interface (online democracy),
- decentralized participation (networked democracy).

At the same time, the identified frames should not be interpreted as mutually exclusive. In practice, they often overlap and coexist within the same empirical configurations of digital democracy. However, their coexistence is not neutral: different frames imply different priorities, logics of governance, and expectations regarding citizen participation.

For instance, a technologically oriented approach may prioritize efficiency and scalability, while a network-based perspective emphasizes decentralization and autonomy. These differences generate potential tensions in both conceptualization and implementation, particularly when digital tools are expected to simultaneously optimize governance processes and expand participatory inclusion.

The coexistence of these semantic frames also reveals a higher level of conceptual organization. Although five dominant frames can be distinguished, they may be grouped into three broader analytical logics that reflect

alternative ways of interpreting digitally mediated democracy.

The technological logic conceptualizes democratic transformation primarily through the development of digital infrastructures and technological capabilities. It encompasses digital democracy and virtual democracy, both of which emphasize the modernization of democratic procedures through ICT and platform-based solutions.

The institutional logic focuses on the interaction between citizens and public institutions. This perspective is represented by online democracy, where digital technologies function primarily as instruments for improving transparency, accessibility, communication, and the quality of democratic governance.

Finally, *the network logic* interprets democracy as a decentralized process of horizontal self-organization extending beyond formal institutional structures. This logic characterizes cyber democracy and networked democracy, highlighting autonomy, collaborative participation, and distributed governance.

These analytical logics should not be understood as competing classifications but as complementary perspectives that organize the conceptual diversity of electronic democracy at a higher level of abstraction. They demonstrate that contemporary debates are shaped not only by terminological plurality but also by fundamentally different assumptions regarding the role of technology, institutions, and citizen participation in democratic development.

This finding suggests that the apparent terminological diversity reflects not merely linguistic variation, but deeper differences in how the relationship between technology, institutions, and citizen participation is conceptualized. Viewed through these three analytical logics, electronic democracy operates as an integrative conceptual framework that brings these analytical logics into a coherent analytical perspective. It therefore functions not as another competing concept within the field, but as an umbrella concept capable of accommodating the diverse ways in which digitally mediated democratic governance is understood and analysed.

These distinctions have important implications for the design and evaluation of digital democratic practices. When different conceptual frames are implicitly conflated, there is a risk that technological solutions are implemented without sufficient consideration of their institutional embedding or their impact on citizen engagement. As a result, the expansion of digital participation tools does not necessarily lead to improved democratic outcomes, but may instead produce fragmented or superficial forms of participation.

Consequently, electronic democracy should be interpreted not as a separate conceptual category alongside digital, cyber, or networked democracy, but as a higher-order conceptual framework that enables their systematic integration. This interpretation explains why the concept has remained analytical relevance despite the growing diversification of digitally mediated democratic practices.

Finally, the analysis is limited by its focus on conceptual definitions rather than empirical applications. While frame analysis enables the reconstruction of semantic structures, it does not directly capture how these concepts are operationalized in practice. Further research is therefore needed to examine how different frames of electronic democracy are translated into concrete institutional and technological arrangements.

Conclusion. The study confirms that the conceptual field of electronic democracy is inherently fragmented, which necessitates explicit definitional demarcation. By applying a frame-based approach, this research demonstrates that concepts frequently treated as synonymous are in fact grounded in distinct semantic structures, reflecting different interpretations of the relationship between technology, institutions, and citizen participation. This not only enables a clearer distinction between related concepts, but also reduces the risk of conceptual stretching and enhances analytical precision and comparability.

Beyond the semantic differentiation of individual concepts, the analysis reveals a hierarchical organization of the conceptual field. At the first level, individual concepts are distinguished by their dominant semantic frames. At the second level, these frames converge into three broader analytical logics. At the highest level of abstraction, electronic democracy operates as a higher-order conceptual framework integrating these complementary logics into a coherent analytical perspective. It therefore functions as an umbrella concept, encompassing diverse forms of digitally mediated democratic practice without being reducible to any single one of them.

This interpretation shifts the understanding of electronic democracy from one concept among several related terms to an integrative framework capable of organizing their conceptual diversity. By clarifying the relationships between semantic frames, analytical logics, and the overarching concept of electronic democracy, the proposed approach provides a more consistent foundation for future theoretical research and for the evaluation of digital democratic practices in applied public governance.

Declaration on AI use. During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT-4 (OpenAI) solely to assist in the preparation of visual materials, including the structuring and formatting of tables. The authors take full responsibility for the scientific quality, content, interpretation of the results, conclusions, and the accuracy and currency of all references cited in this article.

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