A New Agenda for e-Democracy
Position Papers for an OII Symposium

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The e-Democracy perspective of a UK Member of Parliament

I have been involved in e-democracy activity in three distinct areas – Remote Electronic Voting, Office Automation and Net Communication.

Remote electronic voting

Experiments in voting over the public Internet were carried out in my constituency in 2002 and 2003, so that I had the opportunity to monitor them closely. Work has been carried out by the Electoral Commission in the UK and by academics, especially in the US, which has added greatly to the debate around voting over the Internet.

The trials that took place showed that there were still considerable technical challenges to be overcome, especially in relation to elections that also permit voting via other channels. The principal difficulty lies in the real-time checking as to whether an individual has voted via any other channel.

Concerns about the integrity of the electoral process as a whole when any form of widespread remote unsupervised voting is used (including postal votes) remain a major obstacle to proceeding with voting over the Internet.

Additional work should be carried out to investigate the extent to which electors can remain free from ‘coercion and undue influence’ when voting remotely. Comprehensive answers are also needed to the valid questions that are being asked about ‘what if something went wrong’ with the election.

Office automation

This proceeds steadily with increasing numbers of elected representatives using new technology all the time. Members of the UK Parliament have dramatically increased their usage since the introduction of a system of centrally-supplied IT equipment in 2001.

e-Mail is now a common communication tool for both citizens and representatives though still far from universal. Its value is under threat from the growing tide of ‘spam’ e-mail. This particularly affects elected representatives who need to have publicly available e-mail addresses which are then easily harvested by spammers.

It would be helpful to have more detailed information on the extent to which the Internet is now the preferred communication method between citizens and representatives. Work could also usefully be carried out to examine the client groups for each communication method. We do not know whether the relatively low cost and ease of Internet communication is genuinely improving accessibility and contributing to increased political participation.
Net communication

In the beginning was the ‘brochure website’ for anyone starting to use the net to communicate with their audience. These are now widespread in the political sphere. Parties and individuals tell us about themselves and their activities as a ‘narrowcast’ to their web audience.

We have been slower to develop genuinely novel democratic applications using the net. Fundraising and membership are slowly transferring on the basis of additional convenience. For example, a high proportion of Liberal Democrat members now join up and pay subscriptions via the website.

The promise of the net is one of enhanced two-way (or multi-way) communication. Weblogs represent a ‘toe in the water’ for this as interactive public debates. Petitions and mailing lists are a more venerable method that have had some success.

But the picture is still one of the most effective use of a politician’s time being in traditional campaign activities. Getting stories in the local print and broadcast media and producing and distributing paper leaflets are the primary election-winning tools.

The main obstacles to the development of new net tools are time and geography. Constituency-based election systems require political effort to be put into defined local areas. Net audiences cannot be limited in this way. Time pressures on representatives mean that there is little scope for novel forms of campaign activity.

There is little evidence to show that net communication is delivering real benefits in the political process. Those who are pursuing this work are therefore more likely to be individuals who have a ‘hunch’ that this is good for democracy rather than this being a mainstream activity for all politicians. Qualitative research into different forms of political interaction might steer politicians to new forms of activity.

Conclusion

Overall, progress appears to be very slow. The question remains: ‘Why should I do this additional work when I already have enough on?’. The answers that would persuade most representatives are that it would help them win elections and/or enhance democratic participation. If e-democracy is to become mainstream then better evidence of its value in these terms is needed.
Daniela Battisti, Strategy and Policy Office – Coordinator of the Research and Studies Unit, Minister for Innovation and Technologies, Italy

The Italian Way to e-Democracy

Italy: a country-specific analysis

Italy’s continually evolving ICT scenario is deeply affected by country-specific social\(^1\) and digital problems. Data on Italy’s ICT scenario includes:

- 38 percent Internet penetration rate in households (up by 11 percent since 2002);\(^2\)
- gender digital divide: only 35 percent of women surf the net;\(^3\)
- Internet users are still mainly professionals, students, teachers and employees;
- less-educated users have increased, but the web is still mainly used by people with a high-school/university degree (40 percent and 9 percent respectively);
- the use of the web is not frequent – regular users are increasing, although they are still few compared to the European average, and only 40 percent of the families connect daily;\(^4\)
- ‘Between’ reveals that the Internet is often seen as ‘useless’, and, consequently, not used; and
- broadband subscribers are rapidly growing, but penetration rate is still low (5 percent).\(^5\)

The European University Institute of Florence survey on e-democracy confirms that the scenario is rapidly evolving. The report shows that Italy’s Parliament website, which was analysed on the basis of the e-legislation index and typical e-democracy variables,\(^6\) is highly developed and ranks above those of other European countries.\(^7\) The report warns, however, that in Italy e-democracy culture and the use of related technologies is still at an initial phase.\(^8\)

If, on one hand, the national scenario is complex and undergoing constant changes then, on the other, local scenarios are particularly lively in the field of e-democracy.

From theory to practice: how to draft an effective e-democracy project

The problems for the development of e-democracy in Italy are of an organisational nature and arise from an inadequate or incomplete knowledge of the digital culture among its citizens and

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1 Italians are late adopters: according to the European Innovation Scoreboard, the affirmation period of innovative products on the Italian market is 6.7 yrs (versus 4.6 in Finland and 8.5 in the UK). However, the penetration rate of portable devices is very high.
4 Source: ‘Between’ January 2004. Approximately half of the Italian families connect for less than 1 hour per week.
5 This is also due to Italy’s peculiar layout: for broadband to reach small towns (1/5 of the total), 3/4 of the towns need to be connected.
6 Supply of information; bilateral and multilateral interactivity; and attention to the user.
7 If the same index is calculated for Unicameral Parliaments and for the Lower Houses, Italy ranks 6th in Europe.
8 For example, even though all Members of Parliament have e-mail addresses, only 7.1 percent answers e-mails (versus 21 percent average in Europe).
public operators. The main issues that need to be tackled are: the digital divide, the need for a unitary policy, and clear policy indications. Italy’s strategy for the development of e-democracy is based on a *National Notice* for co-financing projects and its *Guidelines*.

The II National Notice on e-government, which sustains initiatives that are promoted and carried out by local bodies by involving large and varied sectors of the local community with regard to local policies, was issued with a view to making the most of such groups and ensuring that participation actually affected the decision-making process. The *Guidelines* published by the Regional Competence Centres include the following ten points:

1. **An analysis of the context**

   a) Overview of ICT penetration in the concerned areas.
   b) Outline of the local socio-demographic reality.
   c) Description of previous/parallel programmes for promoting local participation.
   d) Description of the organisational resources of the involved bodies.

2. **Definition and identification of local policies on which to act**

   The three criteria for the definition of local policies are:
   a) Relevance of the topic for the local community.
   b) Decisional competency and political responsibility of the involved institutions.
   c) Timely involvement of the local population.

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**An Example of Best Practice – Grosseto (First Part)**

Grosseto’s experience and innovations in relations between public and private bodies is particularly interesting. The area, which was hit by an employment crisis at the beginning of the 1990s, was able to at least partially invert the negative trend through two Local Agreements, which ensued from a consultation with the local actors and through co-operation between a number of bodies, that began almost 10 years ago. Grosseto now has a good Internet penetration rate, and the local network includes 4600 accounts. In addition, 2000 families have been offered free ADSL connection and PCs.

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**An Example of Best Practice – The DEMOS Project, Bologna**

Means employed: Forum of Discussion between citizens and Local Public Administrations (LPAs).

In January–February 2002, Bologna participated in the DEMOS exercise, funded by the European Commission as a shared-cost project ([www.bologna.demos-project.org](http://www.bologna.demos-project.org)), which aimed at involving the local community in the LPA decision-making process. The project applied the ‘Delphi’ sociological method for resolving conflicts to create a structured debate on the Internet, through discussion fora and the intervention of experts. The project’s aim was to develop online consultations for every phase of the decision-making process. The exercise focussed on the issue of ‘Traffic in Bologna’ and was developed by users who participated in the debate either from home or at the ‘iperbole’ open access facility in Bologna: participants were pleased to have been invited to take part and were anxious to make their views known.
3. Selecting who to involve

a) Open the decision-making process to all citizens.
b) Establishing institutional partnerships for dealing with real problems jointly.
c) Interlocutors could be: social actors (associations, informal groups of citizens, single citizens) who wish to take part in decision-making processes that affect the local community; and social subjects who are at a disadvantage from a participative point of view.

4. Making the most of past experiences

a) Has ICT been used previously for promoting participation amongst citizens?
b) If so, by whom? On what subjects? In what way and how?
c) What were the results from the participative point of view?
d) What limits were encountered and what real opportunities emerged?

5. Definition of the ‘participative process’ for gaining the citizens’ confidence

a) Rules should be clarified and motivated (What are the specific objectives? Who is allowed to participate? What are the technical means for participating?)

Also, LPAs should:

b) Use citizens’ contributions, allow local planning, answer questions, gather opinions.
c) Identify and define problems that require intervention and their actors.
d) Find alternative solutions.
e) Define and choose feasible solutions.

6. Integrating online and offline participation

The split between innovations in political processes and a low adoption of ICT and use of e-government is enhanced by the fact that the required competencies and digital skills are not evenly distributed, and that ICT is often thought of as a field to itself rather than as a cross-section tool.

An Example of Best Practice – Grosseto (Second Part)

Integration of qualitative and quantitative methods and online and territorial processes

Grosseto’s Structural Plan for gathering citizens’ opinions/ideas was launched in 2002. Citizens were first asked to express written views to help identify and analyse problems, and then to participate in meetings on specific topics. Online discussion fora were also set up. The project, which was carefully monitored throughout its stages, was rated positively by the City: participation from associations and informal groups was high, although individual participation was lower. The use of ICT throughout the exercise ensured timeliness and transparency.

7. Preparing the involved organisations

8. Promoting the project through the media
9. Choosing which technologies to use

An Example of Best Practice – Modena

Modena’s citizens can access information services though the City’s website (www.comune.modena.it). By selecting a topic, users can receive regular newsletters from the LPA on their chosen topic, either via e-mail or SMS. When registering, users provide personal data (name, age, sex, town, and [optional] a mobile number). The system then sends a password via e-mail which enables users to access/edit their profile and select further topics. Users can e-mail questions to the LPA and receive answers directly to their mailboxes: questions and answers are subsequently published on the website anonymously under the FAQs. Another project funded by the Region is the Discussion Forum ‘Stradanove’ (www.stradanove.it) between citizens and LPAs, which offers young people entertainment and useful information through direct communication with their LPA. The information is structured in 3 areas: entertainment, institutional information and online consultancy services. Users may also receive invitations to vote online on topics that interest them.

10. Models and methods for evaluating the participation

Examples of organisational solutions for carrying out the evaluation:

a) Technical–scientific panels for piloting the project, external ones for evaluating it.
b) Mixed (internal/external) panels; panels of citizens.
c) Regular meetings on the project.

Examples of evaluation methods:

a) Focus groups with decision makers, technical and administrative staff, and citizens.
b) Analysis of External Control Groups (e.g. citizens ‘not connected to ICT’).
c) Questionnaires and polls.
d) Analysis of data on online communication; gathering of feedback.
e) Observation of participants.

Problems faced and lessons learned

One of the problems that emerge from sector studies on participative experiences concerns the information/communication core and its consequences in the selection of participants. Some of its most delicate aspects regards the actual circulation of the information and timeliness of its delivery, the publicity it receives, the relationship with the territory, the insufficient differentiation of the public involved, the weak relations between sectors of the LPA working on the same project, the scarce and rudimentary use of the network, and the scarce visibility on the relevant websites.

During the trial of new forms of participation to decision-making processes, a systematic use of online services is often impossible as the limited use of telematic access can actually reinforce existing inequalities regarding the possibility of using ICT; telematic access is also hindered by a shortage of high-quality services. In addition, a widespread lack of digital skills among public deciders, stakeholders and citizens, as well as innate forms of resistance within a society and the division in sectors of the LPA, hinder a fruitful use of ICT as a cross-section tool. Testing new forms of participation therefore would greatly benefit from a better co-ordination of local initiatives: even when institutional websites are highly developed, interactive, and sensitive to the citizens’ informational needs, on-going projects can, at times, still not be made sufficiently visible.
Specific advantages ensuing from the adoption of ICT technologies are:

- faster transmission, updating and exchange of information;
- more flexible communication, which – being less constrained by space–time limits – enables long-distance co-operation (jointly written documents) that does not depend on ‘real time’ communication;
- two-way interactive communication;
- data storage, memory of the process, intelligent data retrieval, diachronic analysis;
- easier access to information (intelligent maps, databases, etc.); and
- education of citizens from a civic/political perspective (e.g. how local institutions work, etc.)

Conclusions: e-democracy as a political philosophy

e-democracy cannot only be pushed from below, that is by greater familiarisation of citizens with technology, nor can it simply be a side-effect of technological innovation, but should be expressly chosen and suggested at a political level. Participants to the Brussels seminar on e-democracy, indeed, believe that e-democracy should not be a governmental programme, but a political philosophy that embraces society as a whole.

An Example of Best Practice – Emilia Romagna

Emilia Romagna’s ‘consulting strategies’: searching for the most appropriate methods

Emilia Romagna is a state-of-the-art example of a successful experiment on new ways of involving citizens through ‘consulting strategies’ that are monitored by its social services. Two of the most involved sectors were: childhood services (900 parents), and the ‘Plan for extra-urban mobility’ (12,500 telephone interviews, 6000 home interviews and e-mail feedback). The ‘Regional network of consulting points’ intends to collate and systematize the results.

An Example of Best Practice – Turin and Florence

Turin and Florence have undertaken a strategic programmes for local development by involving a vast number of economic and institutional actors and associations through the creation of websites. Florence promoted discussion with the LPAs through a highly-publicised website, mailing lists, and online discussion fora. However results are, as yet, modest. Turin built a website with interactive services (e.g. an intelligent map on the strategic plan’s projects) which could be accessed exclusively by the members of the Turin International Association. In both cases the websites obtained good results at an institutional/communicative level and more transparency in the decision-making process, but have not yet achieved new participation from individual citizens.
BT GROUP

BT’s Experience in e-Democracy Projects

Introduction: e-democracy seminars in Europe

In the last year BT has organised and sponsored a series of seminars on e-democracy in a number of different European Capitals. These included Paris, Rome, Madrid, Stockholm, Berlin, Budapest, and the Hague. The aims have been twofold. First, BT itself has wanted to share knowledge on ways of promoting e-democracy in various European countries, while learning about the differing ways in which e-democracy could be approached. Second, BT has also aimed at bringing together practitioners and academics in these respective countries to explore individual examples of best and worst practice in the field and thereby provide a learning arena and focal point.

A key desire has been to identify ways of bridging conceptual aspects of e-democracy and the practical difficulties of turning ideas into concrete policies and common practice. The road towards achieving these goals – and to some extent towards an information polity – is not as simple and straightforward as it may appear. In this sense, by approaching issues that are structural, political, financial, and conceptual, BT hopes that it can bring to the table experience and knowledge that may be of use when approaching some of these difficulties.

BT has accumulated practical experience and knowledge in this area in various ways, including involvement in e-governance and e-voting projects, as well as in its own approaches to and interaction with stakeholders via e-mail discussions and web pages which promote debate and reaction.

This paper will start with a review of the reasons for BT’s interest in promoting e-democracy. Next is a review of some of the projects in which BT has been involved, including discussion of some of the impediments thereby identified, covering trials of e-voting in UK public elections, experience in e-governance in the rest of Europe, and some of the lessons that have risen from the series of seminars held around Europe. Finally, the internal BT experience of increasing participation of stakeholders as a core part of corporate social responsibility will be covered.

Reasons for BT to be involved in E-democracy

Political Reasons

In the UK the turnout in public elections has been declining rapidly and nearly 50% of the population is not participating in the political process. This should be as much a source of concern to a corporate entity as it is to the citizen. Low turnout could lead to a political vacuum into which other forces and pressure groups can enter, not all of which support democratic pluralistic ideas. Even an apparently benign single-issue group can be of real concern if there is no room for the compromise and trade-offs that are part and parcel of the broad party political process.

BT has therefore concluded that it has a vested interest not just in getting more people to vote and participate in elections, but also in being engaged in the party political process more generally in order to increase levels of awareness and participation.
Social Reasons

BT is trying to address several impediments to e-democracy and information society as part of its corporate social responsibility agenda. As a ‘corporate citizen’, BT has identified societal interests which include democratic institutions flourishing with wide popular engagement. The following impediments are relevant to the UK as well as (in most cases) to other European countries.

First, the digital divide. The UK has one of the highest levels of Internet usage in Europe (and in the world) both on an occasional and regular basis (circa 60%). The ‘disconnected’ people can be divided into two groups – those that choose not to connect to the Internet and those who are not able to connect to the Internet. BT is concerned with both groups. However, our greatest concern is with those who cannot connect to the Internet due to financial reasons.

Second, there are cultural and structural reasons for being reluctant to adapt to Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). The Minitel in France, and the culture of Piazza in Italy are examples. Implicit here is angst about technology in general and ICT in particular. Such anxiety exists throughout all classes and discourages access to ICT training and/or the use of ICT.

Third, there is the lack of financial resources on a national level (to distinguish from personal level). This may lead to lack of investment in ICT infrastructure, low levels of ICT training and overall will leave such places behind in their (long) road towards e-democracy.

Projects in which BT has been involved

BT has concluded that in order to better approach, encourage, and understand e-democracy, there is a need to actively participate and promote areas such as e-voting and e-governance (which includes under its umbrella e-administration). The following provide some illustrations of BT’s involvement in such projects.

E-voting in the UK

One of the ways in which BT has chosen to participate in the democratic experience is through its leading role in some of the e-voting experiments, which have been taking place in several places in the UK during the last two rounds of local elections. BT was particularly involved with two cities representing considerable cultural and social diversity. In both places traditional voting methods were supplemented by e-voting through kiosks, the Internet, and mobile phone text-messaging.

The cities were:

- **Sheffield** – three voting districts of this industrial city, which is troubled by many economic and social concerns, offered e-voting methods. Over 35% of the voters in these districts used these methods to cast their ballots.

- **St Albans** - two socially different voting districts of this prosperous town used e-voting methods to cast their ballots. Over 40% of the voters in these two districts in St. Albans used e-voting methods to cast their ballots.

It is hard to evaluate – based on this relatively constrained experience of local elections – whether e-voting is a success or not. The turnout in the districts in Sheffield was higher by circa
10% compared to previous elections with traditional methods of voting. However, other intervening factors could have accounted for this change in the turnout for voting.

It is by no means clear whether the UK (or other European governments) will choose to use e-voting as the method of voting in the future. BT as an e-business has a major interest in participating in such experiments. But BT also understands, as with many other observers, that e-voting is simply one method of participation, rather than the ‘solution’ to political problems, such as the sense of losing efficacy by citizens, the sense of disconnectedness that citizens feel from their representatives, and the overall reduced interest in political life. BT believes that, assuming technical challenges can be overcome, any future role for e-voting must be as part of a wider sweep which includes the creation of new spaces for debate and discussion which are geographically and socially inclusive, regardless of geographic distances.

**E-governance projects in the UK and Europe**

BT is interested in developing and providing more e-governance services as part of delivering online services to citizens in a user-friendly way at any time or place and in a universal manner (e.g. public access points). For BT, such services must go hand in hand with developing a wider and deeper e-democracy, as it will drive up use of and trust in various ICT mediums.

Examples of BT involvement in this arena include delivering the telecommunications needs of the Ministry of Public Administration in Spain and of the federal state of Bavaria in Germany, as well as the recent contract to manage the National Health Service patient database in the UK and the ICT-based delivery of local services in the city of Liverpool. These sorts of contracts have the potential to transform the interaction between citizen and state in a way that must assist the future development of wider e-democratic engagement.

**Internal experience of e-democracy within BT**

BT runs a continuous interactive debate which is open and available to all of its stakeholders. The issues which are debated go beyond the normal managing of BT as a company. BT believes that one of the ways of meeting its corporate social responsibility is by extending the debates to issues of social, environmental and economic impacts via a dedicated part of BT’s web pages: [www.bt.com/betterworld](http://www.bt.com/betterworld). These issues include focusing on communities, fuel and energy, emissions to air, waste, transport, customer satisfaction, services to disabled customers, issues relating to broadband, digital inclusion and most recently the vexed issue of ‘off-shoring’ jobs to India.1

In addition BT’s chief executive Ben Verwaayen has conducted a number of online discussions with broadband campaigners as part of an engagement process which has changed dramatically the understanding of the issues and significantly helped the targeting of investment decisions to the benefit of all. The UK now has the widest availability of broadband of any G7 large economy, with the objective of covering over 99% of the population by the summer of 2005. This dramatic progress is almost inconceivable without the help and stimulus of the online discussion in various fora facilitated by BT and others and the Internet campaigns built and shaped by local broadband campaigners. It is an unsurpassed example of how using Internet channels allows much more constructive engagement with pressure groups and individuals.

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1 For a full detailed list, see: [www.bt.com/betterworld](http://www.bt.com/betterworld)
Promise and Problems of e-Democracy

What has worked? Why?

The application of new information and communication technologies (ICT) to democracy has thrown into stark relief, but is not itself responsible for, the tensions characterising the evolving governance triangle of executive–legislature–citizen relations as they adapt to the demands of public decision-making in the 21st century.

Today, all OECD member countries recognise new ICTs to be powerful tools for enhancing citizen engagement in public policy-making. Despite the limited experience to date, some initial lessons for online citizen engagement in policy-making are emerging:

- Technology is an enabler not the solution. Integration with traditional, ‘offline’ tools for access to information, consultation and public participation in policy-making is needed to make the most of ICTs.
- The online provision of information is an essential precondition for engagement, but quantity does not mean quality. Active promotion and competent moderation are key to effective online consultations.
- The barriers to greater online citizen engagement in policy-making are cultural, organisational and constitutional not technological. Overcoming these challenges will require greater efforts to raise awareness and capacity both within governments and among citizens.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, e-democracy has probably progressed the furthest in those countries traditionally characterised by high levels of attention to, and public debate on, issues of democracy and good governance (e.g. Finland, Sweden, Canada). These are also the countries that have invested the most in preparing the ground for e-democracy in very concrete terms of: research, policy development, resources, capacity-building, mentoring, political support and leadership.

Placing e-democracy initiatives in a broader governance framework is important in ensuring that ICT tools fit a country’s broader social and democratic goals – not the other way round (see Figure 1 on the next page for an example from Canada).

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1 The opinions expressed and arguments employed in this paper are the sole responsibility of the author and do not reflect those of the OECD or of the governments of its Member countries.
What are the obstacles?

The unprecedented degree of interactivity offered by new ICTs has the potential to expand the scope, breadth and depth of government consultations with citizens and other key stakeholders during policy-making. At the same time, such new tools pose significant challenges to governments in terms of their technical, political and constitutional implications. Among the questions raised are: How can government ensure an equal hearing and ‘assured listening’ to so many individual voices? How will such inputs be integrated into the policy-making cycle? How can guarantees for personal data protection be ensured? What is the role of traditional mediators of public voice (such as elected representatives) and new proponents of citizens’ concerns (such as civil society organisations or CSOs)? What aspects of government’s current structure, organisation, resource allocations and available skills need to change to respond to new standards in their interactions with citizens? What is the status of civil servants’ online responses to citizens’ queries or their submissions to an electronic discussion forum? Only a few OECD member countries have begun to address such issues (e.g. by developing a code of conduct for civil servants, or official guidelines on answering citizens’ e-mails).


- *scale* (many voices);
- *capacity* (of citizens and civil servants);
- *coherence* (throughout the policy cycle);
- *learning* (from local level, other countries); and
- *evaluation* (of costs, benefits, impacts).
Additional obstacles currently encountered in developing e-democracy initiatives include: integration of online and offline tools for decision-making; the limited capacity of civil servants and citizens; ensuring sustained political interest and support.

**What policies, methods and tools are needed to ensure successful e-democracy in the future?**

- **Policy**: Establish a framework for e-democracy which firmly anchors such initiatives in government decision-making processes.
- **Methods**: Promote pilots, awards, competition and knowledge-sharing at the local, national and international level.
- **Tools**: Use evaluation tools and performance indicators which will allow policy-makers and citizens to critically assess progress in this area against declared objectives and/or democratic principles.

**Figure 2. OECD 10 Guiding Principles for Online Consultation**

- Start planning early.
- Demonstrate commitment.
- Guarantee personal data protection.
- Tailor your approach to fit your target group.
- Integrate online consultation with traditional methods.
- Test and adapt your tools.
- Promote your online consultation.
- Analyse the results.
- Provide feedback.
- Evaluate the consultation process and its impact.


**Two country case studies**

1. **Finland: ‘Share Your Views with Us’ – Indicators for a Discussion Forum in the Internet**

The Ministry of Finance in Finland launched a project in 1999 called ICT and citizen’s possibilities to influence policy-making. One of the results of this project was a discussion forum on the Internet called *Share Your Views with Us*. The forum was first a pilot project for several years (2000–2003). In the Central Government Reform, the project was assessed to be good enough to be made permanent. No formal evaluation or study was made at that stage. The new revised permanent version of the forum was launched in the autumn 2003. During the planning phase of the new version, specific goals were set up for the forum. At the same time some primary indicators were planned for monitoring the functioning of the forum as well as how well it achieves the goals set.

Even though the forum has been functioning for several years, it is still quite a new phenomenon in the Finnish administration. Through the first years when the forum was in its pilot phase, it was necessary to gather lessons learned and to see how the forum functions. Changes have been made based on the lessons learned, but the basic principles of the forum have stayed the same from the beginning. Now that the forum is permanent it is necessary for
data to be collected on the forum and that this data will be carefully taken into account when planning the future functioning of the forum. The indicators set for the forum will be helpful in assessing its success. It has been decided that in the near future the forum will not go through any major reforms. Now, the emphasis is on the efforts to get the Finnish ministries to use the forum more actively for consulting individual citizens. In measuring the success of this work, the indicators will be necessary.

The goals and indicators try to cover the different aspects (discussions, online-discussions, horizontality) of the forum as well as the different users (citizens, civil servants, ministers). Most of the indicators are more suitable for monitoring and assessing than for actual evaluation. Some indicators are meant to be more in-depth, but they again do not cover all the discussions but are based on case studies (see Table 1 on the next page).

The results of the forum according to the indicators will be looked at more thoroughly every half-a-year. The Board-of-Editors of Share Your Views with Us will be responsible for making the proposals for the future work.

As part of the evaluation, a survey is being carried out at the moment where both citizen-users and authorities are asked about how satisfied they are with the forum, both its content and the technological aspects. The surveys for citizens and authorities (33 questions altogether) include questions like:

- Where did you get information about the site?
- How often do you visit the site?
- Why (e.g. to comment, to read others comments, etc.) do you visit the site?
- Views on the system’s user friendliness
- Is this forum a good way to take part?
- Do you believe the discussions in the forum make a difference?
Table 1. The ‘Share Your Views with Us’ goals and indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase citizen discussion of state government projects.</td>
<td>Number of discussions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projects in Government’s strategic portfolio are brought into the discussion forum.</td>
<td>The percentage of projects in the discussion forum of all the projects in the portfolio.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussions are from all state government sectors.</td>
<td>Statistics of discussions by ministries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-sectional preparation of issues increases.</td>
<td>Number of discussions moderated by several ministries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get citizens interested in developing society.</td>
<td>Number of comments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get civil servants interested in using the citizens’ knowledge.</td>
<td>Number of comments from civil servants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics in discussion forum increase the civic debate at large.</td>
<td>Press follow-ups: 1. How the discussions are quoted in the media. 2. How the topics are further discussed in the media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of the influence of the discussion forum on decision-making.</td>
<td>Yearly case study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens can reach the ministers regularly.</td>
<td>Number of online discussions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


2. Policy lessons on online consultation from Canada

Table 2 on the next page summarises the key policy lessons that emerged from a review of 12 federal online consultation/engagement activities conducted by the Privy Council Office of Canada in 2001.
Table 2. Policy lessons from Privy Council Office of Canada online consultation and engagement activities, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Organisational</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Technical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop online tool in consultation with target group.</td>
<td>Assess time and resources needed.</td>
<td>Develop government-wide posting policy and guidelines.</td>
<td>Develop common software tools and ensure they are user-friendly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use as complement to in-person discussion.</td>
<td>Invest in marketing and promotion.</td>
<td>Provide central contact for legal advice (e.g. privacy statements).</td>
<td>Make site available in both highband and lowband versions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess need for one-way (i.e. comments) and two-way (i.e. discussion) communication.</td>
<td>Consider need for trained facilitator/moderator (bilingual).</td>
<td>Provide mentorship, training and support to organising in identifying their IT needs.</td>
<td>Ensure simple access with no/auto plug-ins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set out objectives, timetable and key questions.</td>
<td>Provide regular summaries and an archive of all comments received.</td>
<td>Compile and analyse lessons learned.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarify role of participants and organisers. Identify government observers.</td>
<td>Consider providing support in evenings and weekends (i.e. when site gets highest use).</td>
<td>Develop standard package of materials (e.g. promotional notices) that can be adapted.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider asking an independent body to run the consultation on behalf of government (e.g. an NGO).</td>
<td>Organise training for e-consultation administrators and moderators.</td>
<td>Co-ordinate timing of consultations to avoid consultation fatigue.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure relevant links to information sources.</td>
<td>Ensure regular feedback.</td>
<td>Ensure internal coordination between policy, communications and IT units.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

e-Democracy is currently in transition from theory and speculation to policy and practice. Parliamentary inquiries into e-democracy have been launched in Germany, the Australian state of Victoria and the UK. In Sweden, the Government has established a Commission to investigate e-democracy. The UK Government has produced a policy paper setting out its vision for e-democracy. The European Commission has funded a number of cross-national e-democracy research projects. A range of practical initiatives are ongoing: online parliamentary consultations in Canada, Finland, Germany, Queensland, Australia and the UK; e-petitioning in Scotland; a portal where citizens can submit draft laws in Estonia; an online policy network in Latvia; e-voting in recent UK local elections; a range of innovative local initiatives from Denmark to Mongolia; on a global level, bodies such as the UN and a new NGO, Access2Democracy, are embarking upon ambitious e-democracy programmes.

With such enthusiasm, resources and expectation invested in what was until recently a somewhat marginal and futuristic policy agenda, the need for critical, scholarly research is paramount. Such research needs to resist a number of dichotomies that have characterised much of the previous literature on e-democracy, as highlighted in the following sections.

**Direct democracy versus (indirect) representative democracy**

Several of the pioneers of e-democracy regarded interactive ICT as a means of transcending representative democracy. For example, Dick Morris (1999), former political strategist to US President Clinton, has argued that: 'The Internet offers a potential for direct democracy so profound that it may well transform not only our system of politics but our very form of government … Bypassing national representatives and speaking directly to one another, the people of the world will use the Internet increasingly to form a political unit for the future.' The political naïveté and populist dangers inherent to positions of this kind have tended to diminish the credibility of e-democracy. In contrast, other political scientists have emphasised the normalisation of e-politics within traditional structures and cultures of representative democracy. For example, Pippa Norris (2001) has argued that as e-politics evolves it will reflect the norms of Schumpeterian thin democracy, with its highly mediated and remote culture of indirect democracy. This dichotomy suggests a stark choice between politics revolutionised and politics as usual, with little scope for intermediate changes.

**Technological determinism versus technological neutrality**

Although few serious scholars adopt either position in its purest form, there has been a tendency in some of the literature either to present e-democracy as the inevitable consequence of inherently democratising digital ICT or else to attribute a degree of apolitical, socially decontextualised neutrality to ICT which cannot be justified. In this Manichean conflict between technocratic determinism and benign technological neutrality, the importance of problematising discourses of technological design, governance and usability are too often overlooked.
Bottom-up versus top-down

Several writers on e-democracy have adopted a libertarian perspective, regarding cyberspace as a refuge from the world of government, law and property. For such thinkers, any genuinely democratic online initiative must emanate from the grass roots. Reliance on governments of any kind as providers of new democratic spaces or forms of mediation is rejected. As governments of various kinds have brought status and resources to the e-democracy agenda, attempts have been made to integrate e-democracy within a wider e-government (or e-governance) policy agenda. Libertarians regard this as the appropriation of a key tool in the hands of civil society; supporters of government projects argue that they are seeking to legitimate the democratic aspirations of the early e-democrats. The questions posed by this dichotomy concern the tense relationship between dynamic social relationships and embedded political institutions.

Chat versus deliberation

The free flow of public discourse within online interpersonal networks is regarded by many scholars as a key opportunity to revive democratic metaphors of the public sphere and political agora. But many democratic theorists, such as Benjamin Barber (1998), have been disappointed by the superficiality and banality of most online chat. Cass Sunstein and others have pointed to the dangers of group polarisation within fragmented media spaces, resulting in online discourse becoming a form of intellectual ghettoisation. As an alternative to such chat, deliberative democrats (who now constitute the dominant strand within liberal democratic theory) argue for more structured and regulated modes of public talk which conform to Habermasian and Rawlsian notions of deliberation. Attempts at running deliberative online consultations and debates have been widely studied, from the UK parliamentary consultations run by the Hansard Society to Fishkin’s first online deliberative poll to the Canadian Government’s online consultation on the future of the health service.

Elements of a new agenda

The scholarly debates around these divisions have taken us so far, but I want to argue that a new agenda for e-democracy policy and research needs to develop some conceptual syntheses that can take us forward. Without developing them in any detail here, I want to propose the following four bases for such syntheses:

Direct representation

Instead of regarding direct democracy and (indirect) representation as mutually exclusive political models, we should be exploring the links between them afforded by new communicative techniques. What do people want from direct democracy? They want to be involved, heard, respected and able to have a direct influence on specific policies that concern them. These are perfectly reasonable and sensible democratic aspirations. Citizens do not want to spend all day formulating and considering policies or passing laws: they want elected representatives to do that, but not to be remote from them. Digital ICT opens up the possibility of developing relationships of co-presence and polylógical interaction in which governance can become more collaborative and conversational. Direct representation would not bind representatives to the precise will of the people, but could connect them to a knowledge and understanding of public will in ways that would be far more sophisticated than reliance upon opinion polling or media mood-setting.

1 See, for example, John Perry Barlow (1996) and Howard Rheingold (1994).
The vulnerable potential of digital ICT

In Realising Democracy Online, Jay Blumler and I argued that new media are neither inherently democratic nor politically neutral, but possess a vulnerable potential for democratic consequences which depend upon a number of factors, a key one of which is policy choice (Coleman and Blumler 2001). We need to regard the Internet as an unfinished historical project which not only possesses the potential to reshape democracy, but of being reshaped by democracy. (The same could have been said of broadcasting in the early decades of the last century.) More research is needed to understand the social shaping of appropriate democratic techniques and technologies.

A civic commons

Governments ought not to attempt to colonise democracy. But democracy cannot afford to bypass government. In policy terms, what is needed is an online space which is not government-controlled, but integrated into the institutions and processes or governance at every level. An online civic commons could contribute importantly to the reinvigoration of the public-service broadcasting model in the new media ecology of the twenty-first century. It would provide a protected space for the public to contribute to meaningful policy debates at local, national and supranational levels. In such a democratic commons, citizens would find themselves regularly in contact with strangers and unexpected views, thus limiting the dangers of group polarisation.

A more (and more than) deliberative democracy

The opportunity for large-scale, dispersed and asynchronous public deliberation is one of the most normatively appealing elements of e-democracy. But some of the regulatory strictures of deliberative theorists tend to close down public talk, constraining it within narrow rationalist and modes. Critics of the deliberative project, such as Iris Marion Young, are right to worry about its exclusive tendency to reject informal, affective, experiential input. e-Democracy projects that provide for a more deliberative approach to political debate need to evaluated in terms of who participates and with what sorts of outcome, but there is also room for experimentation with participatory exercises that are more than deliberative: self-disclosing, empathy-building, pleasure-seeking political interactions which help to drag politics out of the rut of incessant rational choice aggregation and nurture a range of testimonial narratives.

In conclusion, I want to propose for discussion at the 7 May OII symposium that:

- e-democracy is being taken seriously at a number of high-profile levels;
- we are now amassing a range of case studies of projects that need to be evaluated critically, adopting a diverse range of methods; and
- there is scope for moving beyond conceptual dichotomies of some of the early e-democracy literature.

References


2 Jay Blumler and I have set out a case for such an online civic commons in Coleman and Blumler (2001).
3 See my chapter (Coleman 2004) in the recent IPPR book by Cowling and Tambini.


Christoph Dowe, Executive Secretary, pol-di.net e.V.

Political Communication and Digital Developments: pol-di.net in Germany

Introduction

www.politik-digital.de is a German website concerned with the issues of political communication and digital developments in the political sphere. The website is the most important online project of the association pol-di.net, which is based in Berlin. pol-di.net has two employees on a full time basis as well as numerous freelancers.

The politik-digital.de website particularly addresses issues of e-consumerism, e-government and e-democracy as well as the aspects of election campaigns related to the new media. The aim is the realisation and observation of democratic and digital development in the European information society. The weekly content is produced by a staff of about 60 volunteers, who regularly contribute articles throughout the year. More than 8,500 people have subscribed to the weekly newsletter.

Aside from the journalistic work, we organise e-campaigns (e.g. ‘vote against spam’; ‘campaign for a freedom of information act’), write research papers for public institutions and private organisations, carry out benchmarking-tests as quality checks of political websites and organise live chats with politicians, academics and scientists.

In recognition of its work, politik-digital.de was awarded the Grimme Online Award Medienkompetenz in 2001 and the Alternative Medienpreis Internet in 2003. PoliticsOnline considered us one of the ‘25 Who Are Changing the World of Internet and Politics’ in the years 2001 and 2003. The website project www.wahlthemen.de, which we conceptualized and edited for the ‘Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung’ (German Federal Centre for Civic Education), was awarded the Europrix Multi Media Award 2002 in the category ‘Citizens, Democracy and e-government: Empowerment and Improvement’.

politik-digital.de does not receive institutional funding but solely finances its work through content services and research projects. We are glad to have Stephen Coleman as one of our curators (see also the Appendix to this paper).

In terms of e-democracy, what has worked so far? Why did these initiatives work well?

politik-digital.de mainly focuses on German topics. Surprisingly, there is little international scientific and institutional exchange of ideas within the field of e-democracy. The focus on new developments in the US is, in my view, not always justified as innovative ideas can also be found within Europe. Unfortunately, those developments are rarely well-enough publicised as – compared to America – much smaller communities are involved.

In order to describe how e-democracy is best put to use, it is helpful to define it. Our definition is brief and simple. Although it may not be scientifically profound, it is a result of scientific debate as well as our daily work as a pressure group. According to our definition: e-government consists of activities in the fields of e-administration and e-democracy. In Germany e-government focuses to a great extent (about 90 percent) on e-administration. The latter describes the modernisation of administrative processes by means of the new media. We define
Let me introduce you to two projects that serve as good examples in the field of e-democracy:

- **www.elektronische-demokratie.de** was a project of the German Parliament which enabled the user to discuss selected law initiatives online. While its concept and philosophy were good, it nonetheless failed completely. The failure had two main causes. Firstly, technical problems developed when the sponsor, IBM, insisted on using inappropriate IBM-Solutions that were applicable for business rather than for e-democracy tools. Secondly, the initiators failed to point out the effect which the suggestions of users would have on the initiative. Thus the project was not widely enough accepted by the Internet community. Its lack of effects on political initiatives is the key to the failure of most e-democracy projects in Germany. In addition, the political institutions do not take the ideas of online-disussions seriously, nor do they see the need to implement these ideas and proposals into the political process. Such online projects will only be taken serious when the input of users has a legally-binding effect on actual agreements, law initiatives and discussions. Users are quite able to differentiate between real and fake calls for participation. Government administrations and politicians are not interested in using the new ideas put forth as it supposedly means more work and less power. I can name at least 20 projects in Germany to which this applies (every ministry with a forum, every federal parliament, etc). Using the term e-democracy simply to raise information about the political atmosphere in the public signifies an abuse of the term and undermines the goals of e-democracy.

- By contrast, a good usage of e-government in Germany was a project discussing the **rebuilding of the Alexanderplatz in Berlin**. Although technically too complex and marked by 'intellectual' content, it transparently described the procedures of the project proposals suggested by users. The users' suggestions were actually discussed on several political boards. Workshops were organised to bring activists together. Nevertheless, the ideas had no chance of becoming realised and were finally buried in the political process.

I hope these two examples give you some insight into what is being discussed in terms of e-democracy in Germany; both examples serve only as role models.

**What obstacles have hampered the success of previous initiatives, and will these or other obstacles continue to be a problem?**

As already mentioned, there is an intensive debate in Germany about e-administration. With regard to e-security in terms of e-government (e.g. digital signature), Germany wants to take a leading part within Europe. The aim is to create new business models and to modernise and rationalise administrational procedures. Therefore, there are a lot of very big projects regarding e-administration.

Given the above criteria, we know of no publicly-financed e-democracy project in Germany which can serve as a leading example. Germany is still marked by the Prussian tradition and culture of administration. For example, compared to the Netherlands there is far less experimentation in the field of public debate and citizen emancipation. There is no broad cultural understanding of the opportunities and innovative chances possible in a diverse society. A
minister writing a weblog? In the Netherlands that is reality. In Germany, by contrast, this is simply unthinkable or merely used as a tool for public relations. There is no interest in a more transparent and people-oriented administration, as the debate about the freedom of information act shows: promised by the government in 1998, to date there has not been even an official proposal for this law.

What policies, methods and tools are needed to facilitate the future success of e-democracy projects and how can policy-makers, technical experts, or academic researchers contribute to this?

Firstly: More international communication is vital. politik-digital.de tried this on a low scale (no money involved) by implementing politik-digital.ch (Switzerland), politique-digitale.fr (France) and politiek-digitaal.nl (Netherlands). The Dutch connection, especially, is very productive for us. More scientific, administrative and political exchange is needed.

Secondly: Do not count on the European Union to lead the way in innovative, small and controversial initiatives. The funding process is simply too complex to get financial assistance for small innovative institutions, even if they fit perfectly the European idea.

Thirdly: In Germany there is so far no central coordination concerning e-government activities. Experts in Germany are envious of the e-Envoy in Britain. In Germany, various ministers are involved in e-government activities. Unfortunately, there is a lot of self-deception between the different levels of administration. Even though it is a fairly old proposal: Germany needs something like a Minister for the Internet/New Media/Information Society. An alternative is the creation of a central think tank that coordinates the various activities.

Fourthly: We think that the government has to secure quality standards in the form of public broadcasting system legislation. Content is king. There is still is a lack of neutral, professional information in the web. Even worse, since institutions use the Internet more and more professionally for the purpose of public relations, today it is even harder to differentiate ‘good’ from ‘bad’ content.

Fifthly: politik-digital.de places emphasis on low-scale, keep-it-simple-solutions. Big initiatives are also needed, but are seldom fast enough to make use of new trends and opportunities within the new media. E-Voting solutions, for example, are often very highly funded, even though the public need for this will hardly be sufficiently stimulated. In terms of e-voting in national elections, there is no correlation between the costs and the potential.

This last point applies to other technical solutions as well. An example: politik-digital.de suggested to the Ministry of the Interior a small project to allow Internet users in Germany to order online the papers needed for postal voting. A project in Hamburg tried this with striking success. The number of postal voters rose about five percent. Tens of thousands of voters ordered their election records via the Internet. To achieve this, hardly any laws needed to be changed (usually one of the biggest obstacles in German e-government projects). Technical obstacles and security concerns were easily solved. It was a simple technical solution and easy to use for the users.

After eight months the Ministry of the Interior turned our proposal down on the grounds that postal voting is defined as an exception in the constitution. The Internet option could become a regular alternative to the ballot box. This should not be allowed to be changed. During the last national elections in 2002, 18 percent of the voters used the postal vote, two percent more than
four years earlier – the highest percentage ever. Postal voting is a trend – you either have to accept it or actively fight it. Neither is done by our national government.

So much for the few remarks I wanted to make. Please feel free to discuss my points made, as I am eager to profit from the knowledge of the participants of the e-democracy symposium in Oxford. I am glad to be given this opportunity.

APPENDIX: ABOUT POLITIK-DIGITAL.DE

politik-digital.de. started as a journalistic website, addressing a public interested in the issues of e-democracy, e-government and e-Consumer. Since 1998, the site helped to create and develop a whole new field of political communication, online research and project work. The innovative potential of politik-digital.de is based on a broad network of scientists, students, new media entrepreneurs, journalists, and politically aware young people throughout Germany as well as other parts of Europe. The core unit of this network is located in Berlin and is a small but vital player in the emerging field of public affairs/new public management and new media research. One vital characteristic distinguishes politik-digital.de from many other political online projects: politik-digital.de has always been a non-partisan, non-commercial venture. It is the project of a few politically-interested individuals, striving to promote the idea of using the Internet as a new means of political two-way communication.

Learning to survive the new economy boom as a non-profit player, politik-digital.de was successfully able to establish a brand. In times when even the political sphere of the Internet starts to become a playground for e-business-solutions, the soul of the project has to be reinvented continuously. During its nearly six online-years, people have recognized the project as a skilful piece of ‘social software’ because it:

• provides public space in an increasingly commercialised online world and helps to connect politicians and citizens by means of online communication;
• applies the ideals of the open-source movement – even without code, everyone is free to use and to contribute to the web-platform, as long as the basic rules are being respected. Moreover, we want to ‘copy & paste’ the platform into another domain-space (France, Switzerland, the Netherlands) using the experience, the image and brand recognition of politik-digital.de;
• creates new forms of citizen engagement by building a new kind of ‘backbone network’ for those within the online-community who are unable to express their political needs;
• is building and constantly renewing a vibrant and vital ‘digital community’ whilst sensitising and mobilising people for current political issues; and
• continuously invests manpower and intellectual energy in the development of new platforms and routines for political online communication, as we know that the principles of ‘government by discussion’ can be tremendously vitalised within the framework of the new media.
William Dutton, Director, Oxford Internet Institute

Uncaging e-Democracy

A broad vision of e-democracy

Defining e-democracy seems critical to the outcome of our meeting. I hope we don’t confine this term too narrowly.

In my view, e-democracy should be defined broadly since computers and telecommunications, particularly tied to the Internet and web, are connected to nearly all aspects of politics and governance. From paving roads to electing politicians, electronic media are reshaping access to what people know, who they communicate with, and what they need to know to get things done. In all of these ways, technical change can enable more or less democratic patterns of communicative power (Dutton 1999). In every area, electronic media could be used to close or open doors to information, communication and decision-making. In this respect, electronic media could be used in the broadest possible way to reshape the political processes involved in governing.

For example, are not recent initiatives aimed at creating ID cards as central to the future of e-democracy, if not more so, than any initiative to develop e-voting? However, most academics and practitioners seek to define e-democracy more narrowly, such as linking it with e-consultation or e-voting. In some cases, this is an effort to make the topic – and this forum – more manageable. In other cases, it seems to be an attempt to cage the technology to prevent it from getting out of hand.

e-Democracy, and particularly e-voting, creates a technologically-deterministic spectre of more people voting on more things more frequently. As in recent discussion in the UK about a referendum on the EU constitution, many view public referenda and other forms of direct democracy as ‘illiberal’, if not dangerous. Fear over the potential of an uncaged e-democracy – so-called point and click democracy – might well be one of the major constraints on its serious pursuit.

An example of e-democracy success and failure: Santa Monica’s PEN

To resurrect an old example of the potential value of e-democracy at the local level, I would like to summarize the experience of the Public Electronic Network (PEN) in Santa Monica, California.

The PEN ‘electronic city hall’ was launched in 1986 as a municipally owned e-mail and computer conferencing system operated, and mainly developed by, Santa Monica’s Information Systems Department. The city’s residents could use a home computer or one of 20 terminals in 16 public locations to register for PEN and undertake activities on it, such as: retrieving free information about city services; completing some transactions with the City government; sending e-mail to city departments, elected officials, or other PEN users; and participating in numerous computer conferences on topics of local concern. City authorities guaranteed a response within 24 hours to complaints and requests made on PEN.

The City of Santa Monica limited PEN to playing a role in public discussion, and based its development on the proviso that it would not be used for voting and polling, as was the case in
earlier experiments with two-way interactive cable, such as in the Columbus, Ohio, QUBE project of the early 1980s. When used to support interaction between the government and citizens, PEN was generally seen to improve the government’s responsiveness to the public. However, this utilization declined as it became more oriented towards the web in the mid-1990s. PEN, along with most local government websites, then became more focused on simply broadcasting – narrowcasting – information to the public. It actually retreated from a more imaginative view of e-democracy with the advent of the web.

PEN had 4,505 registered public users by 1992, about 5 percent of Santa Monica’s residents. An average of about four to six hundred individuals used PEN every month. Nearly half of their accesses were to about a dozen PEN computer conferences on local and national issues, such as the homeless. PEN was of value in stimulating discussion, communicating with key opinion leaders, involving people who might otherwise shy away from public participation, and offering an opportunity for a new set of people to become involved in local government. However, participation in e-mail and conferencing declined in the face of controversy over the civility of discussions and with the migration of PEN system towards a web-based source of information.

Constraints on e-democracy

The success, then failure, of PEN suggests three significant constraints on e-democracy, in addition to general concerns over uncaging e-democracy:

First, how can we regulate and moderate electronic forums to avoid the problems that undermined PEN while still developing a free and open forum without censuring speech? All public meetings operated under some rules of order, so it should be possible to establish these in cyberspace.

Second, public interest – and lack of interest – in politics is a key influence. Many citizens are interested enough in politics to desire these new channels for communication, but not most. The proponents of e-democracy often harbour unrealistic views of the public’s interest in politics, and experiences with early systems reinforce the degree to which most members of the public are not politically active and attentive to politics. In Santa Monica, for instance, users were more likely than other residents to be active and interested in local politics. Together with the use of public terminals, the important role played by an interest in politics helped the city to create a critical mass of users that was more diverse than the population of home computer users. For example, ‘PENners’ included the unemployed as well as managers and professionals, the homeless as well as home owners and renters – and encompassed a larger proportion of women than expected on the basis of computer ownership, although most users were males. PENners’ core user participation may have rivalled attendance at city council meetings, but it fell far short of the expectations of proponents. This is similar to the findings on the use of Minitel in French elections. This means that policy should balance the value of connecting the politically active citizen, while being mindful of the many who may never get plugged into an electronic democracy.

A third constraint is the problematic legitimacy of virtual networks of communication. Face-to-face confrontation, as in town hall meetings, is another aspect of traditional democratic paradigms and practices that is central to ensuring social accountability. Electronic access challenges this paradigm by enabling citizens to communicate with one another electronically to form new virtual pressure groups and communities of interest linked through ICT networks. Many systems have created opportunities for public dialogue among citizens, with sponsorship from individuals, private, and non-profit organizations as well as government. These help to
organize and form opinion by supporting horizontal networks of communication between citizens, so they have therefore been advocated by those critical of networks that primarily support vertical linkages between citizens and government. In many respects, pluralist democracies are more anchored in citizen-to-citizen networks than in vertical networks of government–citizen communication. Both should be encompassed in discussion of e-democracy. Will they be viewed as legitimate forums?

This said, excellent electronic forums do not encompass the full range of potential opportunities, problems and prospects for e-democracy. In seeking to break through such constraints, we should broaden our definition of e-democracy to encompass its full and diverse scope.

**Reference**

(e)Democracy and Telecottages in Hungary

Introduction

We believe that democracy means different things if one experiences it through its rights-based approach, and when one perceives it as an endowment or facility. If we visualise the two options as two banks of a fast flowing river, then we find that our society is struggling to swim towards ‘rights-based democracy’. The majority of our efforts are expended to get across before the steam of demagogy pulls us away and we find we have hardly any energy left with which to explore the potential of electronic communication.

In the period immediately after the country’s political changes, the people of Hungary were faced with two sets of opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, there was enormous pressure from both within and without the country for the development of a civil society. On the other, Hungary experienced an inrush of the tools and techniques of the information society. While politics, the state machinery and the economy were necessarily occupied with ensuring a smooth and peaceful transition people had to take responsibility for these new social phenomena themselves, to accept the challenge of building a secure, modern democratic nation-state from the ground up, of working out what was to happen to those disadvantaged groups of society who, through no fault of their own were falling by the wayside.

The Hungarian telecottage movement offers opportunities in both regards. It contributes to reviving the esprit de corps of local communities, establishing the traditional institutional bases of civil society, and spontaneously introduces the use of electronic technology into the everyday workings of democracy both at grass-root level and on a national scale. Telecottages make access to the potential of the information society possible for small local communities, and function as centres for the practical application of community informatics in the manner the community defines for itself. In the past ten years, every fifth small settlement has created a telecottage as part of a nationwide self-support network. As a result there is now over 500 telecottages in operation across the country.

Telecottages are not limited to the provision of information within their own walls. Independent local media established in small settlements by the telecottage movement began with local papers and newsletters, followed by the appearance of telecottage-based cable TV and radio. Frequency licences have either been purchased or provided by central government. Telecottages have also begun to provide wi-fi Internet service provision in the local area by microwave transmission. As part of an international association, they are also moving towards complete coverage of the country through satellite technology. It is not difficult to gauge what this means in terms of technological support for increasing local social capital and, at the same

1 This is an excerpt from a recently prepared longer position paper. For more on the full paper please contact Mátyás Gáspár at gaspar.matyas@axelero.hu or Tom Wormald at wormaldo@hotmail.com
time, providing sources of finance for local businesses. Disadvantaged groups can access information sources available on the Internet. Small settlements and individual telecottages have websites which offer an excellent opportunity for sharing best practice and draw attention to alternative and innovative solutions inducing other communities to do the same.

**Who controls the growing national network of community access providers?**

Today in Hungary we face a serious question, one which goes right to the heart of what our work means on a deep, emotional level. Both the state and the business sector is unsurprisingly taking an interest in a well organised and equipped network of civil society organisations which covers the entire country and connects up small communities using the tools of the information society. The question is whether this national network of community access providers should stay under civil control or whether it should become a part of an extension of the capabilities of public institutions alongside libraries, schools, museums and culture houses, etc.?

There are some who, for a variety of historical and political reasons, feel that the telecottage system would be better run as a public institution. There can be no doubt that many telecottages are very short of funding, and that in many places the equipment they are able to provide is woefully inadequate. It is also fair to argue that if the creative and innovative nature shown by communities in overcoming these shortcomings could be turned to more productive ends by ensuring institutional funding from the state. Many successful civil initiatives have already been subsumed by the state in one way or another, with varying degrees of success.

However, we believe that the telecottage movement in Hungary represents a very important experiment. To our knowledge, it is the first occasion when small communities have organised themselves, on a voluntary basis, into a nationwide network using the tools of the information society as a central focus. Through this approach, the telecottage has come to represent a focal point where people can learn and develop themselves and can take an active part in the life of the community and wider Hungarian society as a whole. Through the provision of public services such as e-administration, consultation, information provision, education/training, public benefit telework schemes, etc. this civil society network organisation makes local administration, central government and eventually the state itself answerable to the population in an entirely new way, at the same time as creating the independent, civil controlled framework within which people may participate in processes of government decision making at all levels. For the telecottage movement, e-democracy does not mean always taking the ‘e-’ first. We are seeking to integrate all the strands of democratic activity in our country and give the whole community the opportunity to involve itself. The telecottages are a focal point for the growth of all forms of democracy. We are however firmly convinced that the information society is central to this growth.

The movement currently embraces one fifth of Hungary’s small settlements. Stronger members of the telecottage network are transforming into regional resource centres supporting their neighbours with information and organisation services as well as through joint bidding, service support and tools. The evolution of regional telecottage centres and their affiliate civil society organisations has happened in parallel with state-induced processes. Both printed and electronic media are constantly covering our activities, reporting on our experiences. We cooperate with a wide variety of organisations representing various interest groups including municipal associations and organisations working in informatics, economic and rural development, or involved in youth or equal opportunity issues, etc.
International recognition

The international recognition of the Hungarian telecottage movement has enabled us to be the initiating force behind the creation of the European Union of Telecottage Associations.\(^2\) One of our key objectives is to facilitate the creation of cross border links between small communities, organising their network and enhancing their relations to develop free of political and nationalistic distortions. Currently there are about 100 telecottages working in neighbouring countries in areas with significant Hungarian population, for example in Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Ukraine, Slovakia and Romania. A worldwide network of small communities has a great potential in offsetting political powers aimed at playing the national/ethnic discrimination card. For a sustainable economy, poor and disadvantaged small communities everywhere need to be empowered to strengthen their interest-representation, outside relations and joint action on a world-wide scale, reinforcing in turn the activities of local small community, social values, local small-scale democracies and the many community initiatives and community economies around the world.

Closing remarks

Effective, everyday small-scale democracy, supported by modern information and communication technologies are essential if democracy as a way of life is to adapt and develop. In order to achieve this in countries like Hungary, it is essential that a path be found that works alongside traditional institutions of political power, but remains independent of it. Telecottages are entry points to e-democracy and provide interest representation mechanisms that are free of either location-bound or political constraints. In the future, telecottages could also deliver certain public services, which in practical term will mean also de facto civil control on the end-points of the public service. However, their continuing success, in Hungary and around the world, depends on several things. Primarily, we need the intellectual support and partnership of people like yourselves. We need to share information, and work together towards developing new means of carrying democracy forward.

It is crucial that new theoretical spaces are created in which the kinds of new democratic practices springing up around the world can grow. It is only this way that truly effective and lasting partnerships can be forged with government at all levels. New modes of (e-) democracy must be integrated with both civil society and with existing governmental and state institutions in order to remove the kinds of competition between the state and the civil sector, and within the civil sector itself, which have cost so much in terms of time and resources in the past. At the same time, the networking will also help civil society to strengthen its capacities to self-organization and self-regulation, i.e. to achieve the real emancipation of civil society toward the nation state and global businesses. In future, through pressure from international organisations such as EUTA, we hope to see the fruits of this work.

However, for now, the imminent question and task for us is still to ensure that more and more people reach the shores of ‘rights based democracy’ and minimise the number of those who get carried away by the stream of demagogy.

\(^2\) EUTA was established in Budapest on 25 March 2004 with the following national associations as founding members: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Russia, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia.
Norman J. Jacknis, Chief Information Officer, Westchester County, New York

e-Democracy Initiatives, Obstacles and Future Directions: The Case of Westchester County, New York

Background

Westchester County is located immediately north of New York City. It has about a million residents, who live in a variety of urban, suburban and even rural settings. Following a 'home rule' tradition going back to colonial times, there are 43 fulltime independently operating municipal governments (cities, towns and villages), dozens of independent school districts, fire districts, water districts, etc.

In addition to all of these, the County Government operates a variety of functions from the airport, jail, probation services, police services (especially specialized services, like the bomb squad), parks (including six golf courses and the only amusement park in America owned and operated by a local government), public health services, social services for the primary and others in need, etc. The County spends about two billion dollars a year and employs about 6000 people.

There are seventeen County Legislators, who are elected for two-year terms. The chief executive officer is the County Executive, who is elected every four years. The current County Executive, Andrew Spano, first took office in 1998. Given his own interests and the experience of having co-founded and run an e-commerce business from 1994-1997, one of his first tasks was to create a viable website. Previously, the County website was a very limited 'electronic brochure.'

The rest of this brief paper will highlight some of the more interesting aspects of e-democracy in the county, as a basis for further discussion.

Basic public communications

In almost any other location in America, Westchester County – with a population larger than such cities as Boston or San Francisco – would be the most significant government in its vicinity. However, due to its location in a metropolitan area of twenty million people whose information media are centered in Manhattan and the large commuter population, it is actually quite difficult to achieve effective communications between the public and the government using traditional media. Simply, you cannot govern if you cannot communicate.

In the face of this situation, the County has focused on the use of the Internet to reach its residents at any time of day they are willing to focus on County issues. This has been extensively promoted on all County signs. The County’s logo itself was transformed several years back to highlight its web address. As a result of these efforts and (hopefully) the usefulness of the site, a majority of the adults in the county has visited the website in the last twelve months. We have had a larger number of visitors than subscribers to the most popular metropolitan newspaper or the primary local newspaper.
We rate this a success and note that others do so as well, including both many residents who send us compliments and commercial ventures who want us to accept their links and advertising (both of which are against our policy).

Reflecting the role of the County Government, the website provides much information. There are comparatively few financial transactions since the County does not collect taxes directly from the public or even collect many fees by comparison with city/town government.

Each year, the County Executive posts his various budget proposals first on the website prior to other forms of distribution. His presentation of the main operating budget and the press conference about it are also on the web in the form of live, video streaming.

Public participation

Recognizing the difficulty of organizing the participation of a million residents in often complicated policy making, the County has undertaken a few different approaches, including these examples:

- Most notable is Westchester’s Open Space Forum, which deals with one of the most critical aspects of suburban politics – land preservation versus development. This site was originally used to obtain public comments on the County’s plan to acquire land to preserve open space and quality of life. Since then, it has been used as a structured forum to obtain suggestions on parcels of land that might be acquired. Each suggestion has to be accompanied by an assessment of how well it met the criteria in the official plan. Others in the community could respond to the suggestions point-by-point, if they wish.¹

- The County also hosts public, but special interest, unstructured discussion groups over the Internet. These cover such diverse topics as the Croton River Watershed, educational innovation, Internet safety task force, emergency services, and, prior to 2000, Y2K preparedness.

- The website accepts many suggestions/complaints in various ways and forms. Often these are provided by the public in what is really a web-based application, the other side of which involves County staff/officials. This provides an immediacy and a tracking ability to what would otherwise be an electronic equivalent of postal mail.

- While not every local elected official has been enthusiastic about being on the receiving end of electronic participation by the public (see discussion of the County Legislature), they do recognize its effectiveness. Thus, when the County has had a need to lobby the State or Federal governments, it has turned in critical cases to the use of an ‘electronic post card’. This is a web page that enables a resident to send his/her views on a subject to those levels of government, delivered electronically, courtesy of the County. It should be noted that these messages are usually delivered in the form of computer-generated faxes, since almost all State and many Federal officials do not review, respond or highly value e-mail communications.

County legislature

From an e-democracy perspective, one of the most notable elements of the website is the portion devoted to the Board of Legislators. It was originally put together several years ago by a

¹ A side benefit of this approach is that land speculators could not be sure that these parcels would be selected by the County for purchase. Thus, unlike previous approaches where the County made its own list official, the website does not encourage inflation in land prices.
community group – the Westchester Alliance for Telecommunications and Public Access (WATPA) – when the prior County Executive refused to have any reference to it on the government website. It contains all the minutes of the full Board and its committees going back to 1996 and provides a comprehensive search engine.

However, given the reluctance of a minority of legislators to put their e-mail addresses on the web, the general policy of the Board has been to provide only a general e-mail address for the public to respond to these minutes. For some time, there have also been discussions about the use of listservs, web discussion groups, electronic submission of testimony and the like, but these have not progressed to the point where there is unanimity among the legislators on any of these proposals.

The Westchester Alliance for Telecommunications and Public Access

WATPA was founded in 1992 as the county’s own grass-roots, non-profit Internet society by Andrew Spano and Norman Jacknis (then private citizens). It has provided education of both the public and elected officials, given free web design services and web hosting (including video streaming) to other non-profit groups and, more recently, provided free non-commercial electronic discussion groups on the web and via e-mail (listservs).

As such, WATPA fits into the view that real e-democracy would benefit from a neutral, non-government host. Unfortunately, we have to report that despite many efforts and the absence of costs to any municipality or other users, its use has been limited. The public officials are worried about discussions ‘getting out of hand’ and some have had such experiences. A good example was the sometimes heated discussion that preceded the arrival of President and Senator Clinton as new residents of one of our villages, Chappaqua.

However, some community groups – for example, an association of homeowners around one of our lakes – have used this capability with much more vigor and less concern.

Experiments in online campaigns

In 1993, the current County Executive, Andrew Spano, lost his first attempt for the office in a very close party primary election. During that campaign, prior to the general awareness of the World Wide Web, he set up an election bulletin board system. This was discussed in Clifford Stoll’s book, *Silicon Snake Oil*, because of its novelty at the time and the fact that few voters used it. It is worth noting that the BBS was extremely useful as a means for the widely dispersed campaign to communicate and coordinate.

(Any discussion of e-democracy in 2004 must similarly note the use of the Internet by the campaign of Howard Dean for the Democratic Party Presidential nomination. This too, it turned out, was much more useful for communications among campaign volunteers than as a tool to capture votes of the undecided. It was quite successful in getting more young people involved in the campaign, which is an important point for what it says about older people and their use of electronic tools.)

Observations on the state of e-democracy

While the overview above is necessarily brief, our experiences with these efforts have led us to some observations on the current state and future of e-democracy:
As a local government, Westchester is bound by the laws of the higher level State and Federal governments. Many of these, in various ways both obvious and subtle, restrict our ability to expand e-democracy. As Mr. Spano says, ‘it is hard to run a 21st Century government with 19th Century Laws.’

Many elected officials and many voters are reluctant to adopt e-democracy wholeheartedly. This reluctance stems in part from their lack of comfort with technology. Thus, it is important to remember that in the US the ‘political class’ is quite a bit older than the general population. As younger people, more comfortable with the Internet, start to vote regularly, participate in government more, and get elected, this situation is bound to change. I suspect that we are facing the familiar S-curve of technology adoption, lagging a few years behind the commercial use of the Internet.

Nevertheless, the Internet could still be made easier to interact with. This includes more conversational (artificial intelligence-based) interfaces, support for multiple languages in a diverse society, and even non-visual delivery mechanisms, such as speech recognition and computer speech. Westchester County has used all of these methods to provide services.

Using traditional means of democracy, government has always faced being overwhelmed by an unrepresentative activist minority. The Internet has enabled many of our residents to participate who, in the past, were not able to even attend daytime meetings of policy making bodies. However, until the Internet becomes even more ubiquitous than it is now – and perhaps even at that point – we always need to be concerned that this increase in the number of participants will still be limited. This makes the minority of activists larger, but still a minority.

Given the enormous volume of information the County Government already provides about government services and policies and the limited time most people have, it shouldn’t be surprising that many will not participate even in an expanded e-democracy. With this in mind, it is best to focus on areas where people can bring individual experience, skill, judgment, passion and knowledge to a problem, rather than expect participation in the full range of issues that legislators must address. This was one reason the Open Space Forum made sense, since people do know their own local areas well and have something worthwhile to contribute to the discussion.

e-Democracy is more than policy making. To some extent, the Internet and related technologies make it possible to ‘devolve’ government to individuals. An example is the way that emergency and public safety information has been made available in Westchester based upon the location of the individual. In severe crises, this enables people to govern themselves while still implicitly coordinating their behavior with others.
Peter Kellner, Chairman, YouGov

e-Democracy – What is the Market Research Society’s role?

Introduction

e-Democracy in some form is inevitable. How long it will take to arrive, and indeed what ‘it’ will look like when it does, remain uncertain. But the marriage of modern communications technology to citizen-power is as certain as any product of crystal-ball gazing can be. The capacity of public institutions to distribute information, argument and questions without constraints of cost or time, coupled with the ability of electors to engage in debate and give full responses whenever they want, without leaving their home, provide an opportunity for democratic innovation that is unparalleled in modern times.

Whether this innovation will be wholly beneficial is another matter. It could be used to enrich the dialogue between citizens and their representatives in ways that radically improve the ways that decisions are taken. Or it could be used by cynical politicians and bureaucrats to warp and manipulate the public voice, to avoid awkward dilemmas and to evade responsibility. One of the critical tasks facing us all will be to ensure that e-democracy expands rather than distorts the democratic process.

Therefore it is vital that alongside the debate about the opportunities for e-democracy, we hold a second debate: Should it be regulated – and, if so, how? How can we prevent it being misused? What rules are needed? Should these rules be no more than informal, best-practice guidelines, or will we need a more solid regulatory structure? How do we strike a balance between the extremes of minimal regulation that does too little to deter misuse, and over-tight rules that snuff out imagination and new ideas? Above all, who should lead this debate – is this an enterprise in which the Market Research Society (MRS) should be centre-stage; or should the MRS do little more than help to move the scenery when the lights go down? This paper does not offer definitive answers to these questions; its aim is to help focus debate on them.

What is e-democracy?

Like a horse, e-democracy is easier to recognise than to define. It covers those arrangements by which electronic communications are used by those with power and the citizens they serve to interact with each other in order to inform and modify the way that power is used. e-Democracy is NOT about paying speeding fines over the Internet (that is e-government); it IS about consulting on whether the speed limit on a particular stretch of road should be raised, lowered or left as it is. It may, one day, be used as a way of empowering citizens in the process of making major national decisions.

A broad distinction may be drawn between ‘soft’ e-democracy and ‘hard’ e-democracy. ‘Soft’ e-democracy concerns the way public institutions – not only local or national government – seek voluntarily to engage their clients and customers in order to inform their decisions. ‘Hard’ e-democracy concerns more formal changes in the way electors choose their representatives and determine the policies that those representatives execute. ‘Hard’ e-democracy is in its infancy; ‘soft’ e-democracy is increasingly commonplace. By understanding the practice and potential of ‘soft’ e-democracy, we can begin to tackle the critical questions about how ‘hard’ e-democracy should develop in the future.
YouGov has been at the forefront of developing ‘soft’ e-democracy. Online methodology allows for more complex interactions among very large groups of participants than conventional opinion research. It allows people to make longer responses to open-ended questions which can then be processed by the computer to map the range of responses and lead to a series of propositions. Respondents can then, in a second phase, consider a variety of propositions, with arguments for and against, and weight up the consequences in ‘deliberative polling’ before making their decisions. This process can be extended over several waves so that participants are truly interacting, not simply giving their ‘top-of-the-head’ reactions. A formal experiment in this process is now being conducted by YouGov and the Oxford Internet Institute under Oxford’s Professor of e-Democracy, Stephen Coleman.

YouGov has also conducted online consultations for commercial and government agency clients of a more limited kind, but which nevertheless use the greater interactivity allowed by the Internet. One example was for the National Patient Safety Agency, which was interested in how the public thought NHS ‘adverse incidents’ should be reported. Should the terminology favoured by medical staff continue to be used, or should more down-to-earth language be employed instead? If so, what kind of language? We took respondents through a series of ‘adverse incidents’ demonstrating the range of medical accidents that occur, and then asked them to come up with their own terms. In a second wave, a number of respondents’ suggestions were put to the whole sample, and a consensus on the best was reached. A parallel process with NHS staff produced conclusions that were acceptable both to medical practitioners and the public.

Public service providers are now required by legislation to consult with the public on strategic decisions they intend to take. Conventionally, this would be achieved by inviting the public to discussion meetings, or by a conventional opinion poll. YouGov has conducted consultations for NHS Strategic Health Authorities, creating open-access online polls in specific regions. In these cases, a complex methodology was not used. Nevertheless, the consultation had two advantages over conventional methods:

- First, the poll was longer, and allowed respondents to think about their answers without the pressure of facing another human being who might influence them – simply by their presence – into giving what they might consider ‘correct’ or expected responses.
- Secondly, the process was publicised in the local media, so anyone could take part. While conventional polls may well represent the views of the community by seeking the views of a random cross-section, individuals do not feel consulted if they themselves have not been asked. This format allowed participation quickly and easily, in a form convenient to all those who have Internet access – a potential improvement over invitations to attend public meetings, which rarely achieve large numbers, and tend to attract special interests with ‘an axe to grind’. These open-access surveys achieved between one and two thousand respondents, far higher numbers than for conventional open consultations (where typically fewer than 50 attend meetings, and only a few hundred fill in paper-based questionnaires).

It is, of course, possible that e-democracy will not evolve beyond the ‘soft’ variety. Possible – but unlikely. ‘Hard’ e-democracy may arrive slowly, and in a jerky and initially experimental manner; but that it will come in time is somewhere between probable and certain.

The reason for this is essentially simple. It concerns the nature of representative democracy. Depending on how one dates its origins – to the efforts of Theseus and Cleisthenes in Athens in 507 BC, or the establishment of Iceland’s Althing in 930 AD, or the meeting of the Oxford parliament in 1258 – its basic offering has remained unaltered: that the best way of deciding
public policy is for a group of people to come together to debate and decide the issues of the day on behalf of the citizenry as a whole.

At first, and most notably in ancient Athens, the distinction between ‘representative’ and ‘citizen’ was blurred: the number of citizens with the right to vote was sufficiently small to be comparable with the number of representatives with the right to decide. As the franchise grew, reaching (almost) all adults in (almost) all democracies by the twentieth century, the distinction became greater. Representative democracy became its only practical form. The principled arguments in its favour remained (that calm deliberation, rather than mass meetings, provide the best environment for determining government, assembly or council action). But it had an added, huge, advantage. It also enjoyed a technical monopoly. There was no alternative way to reconcile the notion that the people are sovereign with the need to organise and inform the incessant flow of public policy decisions.

Modern technology has the power to challenge that monopoly. Increasingly, it is destroying the practical barriers to the ability of citizens to inform themselves and to deliberate with each other.

Let us take these points in turn. Before the Internet, there was no practical way by which the background documents could be circulated to everyone. Now, should the political process allow, they can be made available online at the same moment that they land on a minister’s desk or are lodged in the library of the House of Commons. That is not to say that many citizens will take much advantage of this innovation. So what? MPs loyally voting according to their party line do not always read every word of the documentation to which they have access. The point is that the information is available. Modern technology allows those citizens with an interest or expertise in a particular subject to delve into it as never before. There is no technical reason why ministers and parliamentarians should retain their privileged access to information. It can be truly democratised.

Secondly, deliberation need no longer be confined to elected representatives. Until now, consultation has been the sad Cinderella of the democratic process. Its most familiar forms have been opinion polls, letters and public meetings. All have their virtues, but none comes within a mile of a group of elected representatives in bestowing either coherence or democratic legitimacy on public policy decisions.

Once again, modern technology poses a massive challenge to the way we do things. Online deliberation can embrace far more people than are able or willing to gather in a church hall on a wet Tuesday evening; it is more interactive than letter-writing; it is more dynamic than opinion polls can ever be. The days of representative democracy’s technical monopoly are almost over. It may (or may not) remain the best way of reaching public policy decisions; soon, however, it will not be the only way.

Whether or not an ‘official’ form of ‘hard’ e-democracy is ever embraced by government, it is highly unlikely that private initiatives will not make their impact. Recently, the TV production company Endemol (responsible for Big Brother) floated the idea of using the ‘Pop Idol’ format to choose ‘champions of the nation’, something like elected ‘People’s Peers’. Whether it happens or not is in the hands of broadcasters. And if it does, its effect can only be guessed at. Will winners then run in real elections as independents? If they win, will they use e-democracy to keep in touch with their voters, more than conventional party politicians?

A new online party is being formed in February, which says it will use the Internet to allow all members to determine policy, and will choose candidates who are willing to be contracted to
vote – if elected – according to the direction set by the members. Recruitment to the party is aimed at creating a cross-section of the public, rather than people with a shared political agenda. If the party succeeds, it will not – in the technical sense – be an example of ‘direct democracy’ (in which the electorate decides, as in national referenda) but of ‘direct representation’ (in which participants among the public have control of their representation within the representative democratic system).

Democratic initiatives such as these cannot be easily controlled by democratic theorists or market research specialists. But whether or not there can be, or should be, any form of regulation, it is incumbent on us to consider what we would regard as ‘best practice’, against which initiatives can be critiqued.

A number of questions arise:

1. For what kind of decisions is ‘hard’ e-democracy both feasible and desirable? In its initial stages, should it be confined to local issues such as residents’ parking?

2. Where it is both feasible and desirable, how should it be organised? Should it lead to a simple e-referendum, with the majority decisive, or should it be purely consultative, with the final decision left to elected politicians? What are the responsibilities of organisers to inform respondents on how their views will be used, and to provide feedback on the process?

3. To what extent should deliberation be required to be part of the structure or decision-making (if at all)? How should deliberation be included – the consideration of alternative arguments agreed by independent experts? Consideration of arguments put forward by other participants?

4. Where it is feasible but not considered desirable (and who should decide this point?), how can defences be put in place to prevent e-democracy being applied and giving the whole process a bad name?

5. How can people who are without Internet access be engaged in e-democracy so that they do not become a political under-class? (This issue concerns not only people who choose not to have Internet access, or those who cannot afford it, but those who have particular difficulties – for example people who are blind, or for whom English is not their first language.)

6. Conversely, how can e-democracy be designed to be confined to the people who should take part (for example, the residents of a defined group of streets)?

7. In as far as e-democracy contains a consultative element, in which citizens express their views rather than simply tick boxes, does the privacy of individual participants need protecting – and, if so, how?

8. Assuming privacy issues can be resolved, who should have access to the full set of comments – a limited group of politicians and (local / national) officials, or everyone?

9. If everyone has access to full comments, will some kind of filters be needed to guard against libel, etc?

This list of questions is not exhaustive. Its purpose is to illustrate the range of issues that need to be considered if e-democracy is to become both popular and effective.

Hovering over these questions is a larger issue: who should lead the debate? Should it be ‘owned’ by the Government, should it be nurtured away from Whitehall, or should it be a free-for-all with organisations such as the MRS providing a responsible critique?

This paper argues: (a) that e-democracy needs to be explored in a wide variety of ways, and (b) that its earliest formal expression is likely to be at local level; only in its later stages of evolution...
will it alter national decision-taking. This implies that the Government should watch rather than dominate the early growth of e-democracy. This, in turn, suggests that the development and enforcement of best-practice should remain out of the hands of national politicians and civil servants for the time being.

Yet anarchy would be as bad as the deadening hand of national bureaucracy. Hence this paper’s view that the Market Research Society should have a role – at the very least as a clearing-house for sharing the experiences of the early practitioners, and possibly as a maker and enforcer of the rules that will be needed to ensure that e-democracy abides by the highest standards.
Christopher L. Lee, Executive Director of Administrative Services, City of Mobile, Alabama USA

The City of Mobile’s Focused Strategic e-Democracy Initiative

What has worked in Mobile

The generally accepted definition of e-democracy is anything that governments do to facilitate greater participation in government using digital or electronic means. These initiatives can include e-forums, e-town hall meetings, e-consultations, e-referenda, e-voting, e-rule making, and other forms of e-participation. I believe we can also term it as any form of ‘digital engagement’.

In the broadest sense, e-democracy is the evolution of e-government and the development of digital channels for service delivery to our citizens. What has worked very well for the City of Mobile is our focused strategic initiative to provide basic access to government services through digital channels. Customer service has been a priority and ‘One Call to City Hall’ was established in 1990 with the setting up of our Action Center. This telephone system evolved into the e-ReAct software application, which captures any type of citizen complaint, service request, information request or directory assistance request and ties the information to Mobile’s Geographic Information System (GIS). This application development has been our most successful ‘digital engagement’ initiative.

Our other successful initiative has been our methodology and development strategy for our city website. This development was based on constant measurement and feedback from citizens or active constituencies. Therefore, there has been much more two-way engagement and utilization of digital channels of service delivery by the local business community. The specific constituencies who have been most active are those in the development community, homebuilders association and commercial realtors.

To sustain this momentum of engagement, we publish an online newsletter titled The Permit Gram and solicit input. We believe this model will help us succeed in greater citizen participation in other forums.

Obstacles

Computer literacy, the absence of viable best practices and the fear of change may be causative factors in the lack of more robust e-democracy initiatives. We have addressed this somewhat by the issuance of wireless PDA’s to increase the use of e-mail and scheduling, coupled with tailored training for each of our City Council Members. Computer literacy is also an issue with older citizens and the lack of motivation to adapt and change is a considerable challenge to a municipality. We have addressed this by offering computer training in our community centers. This fact is well documented in the low utilization rates nationwide for e-services in general.

Another obstacle is the lack of initiative on the part of the collective elected leadership for any e-democracy project in the form of town-halls, referenda or any form of e-participation. This may also be caused in part by voter and citizen apathy. In the past two municipal elections, which are held every four years, voter turnout has averaged less than 30 percent of the eligible voters.
This is the easiest obstacle to overcome through marketing, training, orientation and demonstration of a successful pilot project.

The final obstacle the City of Mobile has faced in the past four years has been a very difficult economic climate. The majority of our revenue is based on sales tax, which is highly elastic and has resulted in a dramatic loss of revenue. That situation is finally turning around and we are now experiencing growth above what was budgeted. However, the economic environment we have been in has prevented any investment in marketing, focus groups or education for constituents on a viable, robust, broad-based e-democracy initiative. The past funding has allowed investment for only mission-critical functions and infrastructure of IT.

I believe the main future obstacle will be continued voter apathy, which will make successful marketing a challenge. Until demand is created, the motivation necessary for our collected elected leadership to accelerate development in this area will be lacking.

**Policies, methods and tools that need to be developed to facilitate e-democracy**

Policies need to be established that mandate the capability for e-town hall events that mirror the meetings City Council Members hold in their Districts. This would serve to increase participation for those unable to attend for whatever reason. Marketing efforts need to be coupled with the establishment of focus groups to build citizen demand for e-democracy initiatives. The collective elected leadership needs to be educated on best practices and what is working in other cities. Demand has to be created at both ends of the political spectrum, elected leadership and engaged citizen.

Tools to create better, more efficient channels of communication are also needed. Regarding the website and integration with internal applications (such as e-ReAct), e-democracy will be much easier to develop and explore once these communications tools advance and are in place. Getting citizens easier access to their Council representative, through specific online forums, online council meetings, discussion boards, issue tracking, etc. will encourage more citizen participation in e-democracy. Tools that enable city employees, staff, elected officials and the citizen base to better integrate daily workflow, content posting, and information exchange will make a website and all of these new communication channels more accessible, more functional and will encourage more participation in e-democracy. Once these communication tools are in place, and the website can be viewed as a core component of the communication strategy of an e-democracy initiative, the website and other digital tools become more valuable and more popular. Easy-to-use, powerful communication tools will help breakdown digital divide barriers.

Over the course of the past few years, the City of Mobile has developed tools to enable city employees to provide department-level content additions and updates in a timely manner to the website. An easy-to-use Content Management/Administration System was developed to allow such items as: City Council agendas and minutes; Parks and Recreation Community Activities programs; Urban Development Permit Grams; meetings, minutes and Letters of Decision; Purchasing Bids; departmental news and photos, such as Road Closings and other announcements; Police Department ‘10 Most Wanted’; and other activities. These tools have streamlined the time taken to post information publicly, and the simplicity and flexibility of the administration system has greatly increased the amount of information on the website.

Additionally, the Urban Development Department has deployed a powerful system to allow citizens and businesses to check on the status of permit and license requests, schedule
inspections and comment on public hearings. This functionality, along with our online GIS mapping, system has begun transforming the way the City of Mobile website is used. It is quickly becoming an indispensable resource for the City, its citizens, developers and businesses. It is our goal to continue the development of these tools to streamline and increase our communication capabilities and continue our e-government/e-democracy initiative.

Website development must continue with ease of navigation and usability of information as primary considerations. Graphic linkage with data sets and accessibility need to also be issues of consideration. Mobile’s own population speaks 45 different languages and dialects. Providing viable information and services to such diverse constituencies is a daunting challenge that is not going to get any easier.

**Lessons learned and why they worked well**

Development of information and online transactions related to the local development community, i.e. homebuilders, commercial realtors etc., has been very successful and we measure the results. This has worked well because they are a vocal and engaged constituency that clearly understands the digital medium. We actively solicited their input initially and continue to do so through a variety of media. This is the template for accelerating the development of e-democracy. The challenge is introducing this across the spectrum of diverse constituencies.

Development of our e-ReAct application served as our first initiative for digital engagement. It worked well and continues to improve because it addresses the most basic need of citizens: requests for service and information. It monitors and tracks these requests and provides us with the ability to provide substantive and viable feedback when questioned as to status.

The lessons learned are twofold. The need has to be identified with substantive input as to the desired outcome for service, in this case digital channels of delivery. The second lesson is that there has to be a demand or a demand created through active marketing and orientation. These initiatives cannot succeed in a void and there has to be an expectation of credible, substantive outcome.
Stuart McKee, Director, Washington State Department of Information Services and CIO, State of Washington

Washington State: A Leader in Digital Government

Background

Washington state is a recognized leader in digital government both nationally and internationally. The state has won numerous national awards for innovation, and is consistently recognized for its efforts to make government more accessible to citizens. Early in 2003, Washington was named ‘the most digital state’ in the country, based on a five-year national survey.

The Pacific Northwest – home of Microsoft, Boeing, Amazon.com and other groundbreaking global companies – boasts one of the most technology-savvy populations in the United States. Our citizens have high expectations that government will deliver services as easily and conveniently as the private sector. As technology becomes increasingly important in business and in our daily lives, government must continue to deliver services online that stir economic activity, empowering and enabling individuals and industries.

Washington state’s Internet portal, Access Washington™ http://access.wa.gov/ is a jumping off point for hundreds of online government services. From Access Washington, citizens can open an account for secure transactions with the state, order certificates, find a contractor, file a claim, reserve a campsite, report a fraud, find a job, get a business license, obtain a criminal history, file and pay your state taxes, find missing money, get a fishing license and more. They can access state agency websites, gain an easy path to the Legislature and courts, or find links to education and business resources. With its centerpiece search tool, Ask George™, citizens can quickly look up a law or regulation, find content contained on all state agency websites and even key services on city and county websites across Washington.

From this central location, citizens can access government information and perform a wealth of tasks online. For example:

- **Transact Washington™**: Transact Washington http://transact.wa.gov/ is an innovative, enterprise-wide authentication gateway to secure government services. Citizens and businesses can conveniently conduct multiple, secure business transactions with Washington state government using a single electronic credential. Transact Washington saves time and money for citizens, businesses and agency staff while meeting stringent business process and security requirements.

- **Online child support payments**: Through the state’s Department of Social and Health Services (http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/), parents can make child support payments online. The service is free, cuts processing time compared to paper processes by 50 percent, and allows employers to process child support payroll deductions for multiple employees in a single session.

- **Online access to campaign finance records**: The Public Disclosure Commission (www.pdc.wa.gov/) was created by ballot initiative to provide public access to information about the financing of political campaigns, lobbying expenditures, and the financial affairs of public officials and candidates. The PDC is a watchdog agency that ensures compliance with disclosure provisions, contribution limits, campaign practices and other campaign finance laws. Citizens can access thousands of documents and
conducted research by visiting the PDC site, recently nominated for a 2004 Webby award for best government and law website.

- **Online License Renewals**: Through the state’s Department of Licensing [www.dol.wa.gov/](http://www.dol.wa.gov/), citizens can renew vehicle license tabs, certain professional and business licenses and will soon be able to renew personal driver’s licenses online. These services have proven especially beneficial for military personnel.

- **Online business and personal tax payments**: Through the state’s Department of Revenue [http://dor.wa.gov/](http://dor.wa.gov/) citizens and businesses can pay taxes online. Use of this service continues to increase and the agency was recently honored for tax administration excellence by a prestigious national publication.

- **Online reservations for Washington’s parks**: Through the state’s Parks and Recreation Commission [http://www.parks.wa.gov/](http://www.parks.wa.gov/) citizens can reserve a campsite 24 hours per day. The percentage of reservations made online is climbing rapidly and is expected to exceed 50 percent by the end of this year. The added benefit has been a drastic reduction in costs to the agency.

### The Digital Government challenge

By far, the single largest challenge encountered to date in Washington state is instilling a culture of change across state government. Technology has made rapid change possible and in many cases necessary. Technology has essentially outstripped our human ability to adapt to change. Radical initiatives can be enacted much faster than people are emotionally prepared for. Government has traditionally had an institutional bias toward inertia and technology tips the scales in favor of movement. This culture will continue to be our biggest challenge to future projects as well.

### Tools and policies: Washington’s guiding principles of Digital Government

Washington’s Digital Government Plan ([http://dis.wa.gov/role/digitalgovplans.htm](http://dis.wa.gov/role/digitalgovplans.htm)) outlines a number of specific principals to be applied as best practice to every initiative. These tools are vital to creating a structured environment that encourages consistency and efficiency across the enterprise, and ensures the best use of taxpayer dollars by providing citizens with the services they want and need in a way that’s both focused and sustainable:

- **Citizen-Centricism**: The citizen as owner of government, not just a customer of its services, is the common and first decision point in the design and implementation of digital government.

- **Convenience and ease of use**: Online applications are designed to improve citizen convenience and ease of use by improving service delivery and reducing waiting periods.

- **Business transformation**: web-enablement is a necessary but, by itself, insufficient outcome of digital government. In the design of applications, architecture, and infrastructure, and in the development of the policy framework, it is vital to extract time, cost, and effort from business processes and their related value chains.

- **Cost and complexity**: It should be no more costly, and should be less complex, for citizens to do business with government online than by conventional means.

- **Capacity**: The new investment required to expand capacity through digital government should be amortized across applications and agencies, not borne solely by the first application in a cost benefit analysis. Once established, the new channel should drive down the cost of delivering a unit of service.
• **Consistency:** The design of online applications should adhere to common architectures for security, authentication, electronic payments, and universal user interface design.

• **Enterprise-wide Solutions:** The design of online applications should lend itself to the coordination of services between, and among agencies. The use of shared infrastructure and design templates lends itself to transferable solutions across agencies.

• **Performance:** The design of online applications should improve performance of the business transaction cycle by reducing time, effort, and complexity.

• **Accountability:** The design of online applications should improve data accuracy, and transaction auditing, archiving, and retrieval.

• **Time to market:** Online applications should be scoped such that releases are developed and launched in three to nine months.

• **Bias for action:** Agencies should be willing to be a first mover with the confidence to ‘launch and learn.’ In taking appropriate risks, first movers should use sound practices, exercise common sense, and act in good faith.

**Conclusion**

Technology is changing the way we live, do business and interact with government. Our challenge is to explore and map the relationship between e-government and e-democracy. Can our current infrastructure be used to empower e-democracy? Will facilitating e-government as a best practice encourage the development of e-democracy? We must consider what it will mean to move beyond the phenomenon of ‘e’ and continue to foster a culture of innovation.

As we continue to increase our ability to collect data in new and unanticipated ways, standards and definitions should be agreed upon. Technology allows us to collect massive amounts of data in new and unanticipated ways, from audio and video to GIS and spatial data. Individual privacy is a value and a right in America, and we must carefully consider the impact of technology on privacy, by engaging in public policy debates over the meaning and boundaries of privacy. Can we write laws fast enough to protect our citizens? Are laws even the answer?

John Kenneth Galbraith said ‘The real accomplishment of modern science and technology consists in taking ordinary men, informing them narrowly and deeply and then, through appropriate organization, arranging to have their knowledge combined with that of other specialized but equally ordinary men. This dispenses with the need for genius. The resulting performance, though less inspiring, is far more predictable.’

As leaders in government technology, we have the opportunity to direct our initiatives in a way that anticipates the will and the best interest of the people. The foundations we build now must be engineered to ensure government’s ability to be adaptive and responsive. We’ve arrived at a critical crossroads during this time of change, poised on the edge of a global metamorphosis that affects us all. Humans have faced these historical moments before in the form of the printing press, photography, the telephone, the radio, the television and the Internet. As these new technologies continue to erase boundaries, remove limitations and blur borders, the world feels ‘smaller.’ Ideally, this connectedness will lead to the emergence of a global citizenry – a population that may still only vote locally, but which will think, act and organize globally. The question we should be asking is whether we will participate in this development or whether we will simply watch it happen. Have we positioned our organizations to be instrumental in this time of change?
Building a New Paradigm for e-Democracy

Background

The London Borough of Camden – Camden Council – is a local government authority employing around 6000 people to provide a wide variety of services to 197,000 residents as well as large numbers of those visiting working or studying in the area. Camden also acts as a conduit for governmental services and supports a range of voluntary sector organisations providing specialist services.

Located in central London, Camden is home to an ethnically diverse population with areas of deprivation mainly in the south of the borough and the organisation has a duty to provide services equally for all citizens. Camden Council plays a strategic role in helping to ensure cooperation between itself and other statutory organisations providing, for example, health, higher education, business support and training, and is involved in a number of cross-sector partnerships to tackle issues of social exclusion and economic regeneration. It is currently developing with these partners, a Community strategy, which sets targets for service delivery across the full range of activities from education and training, to community safety, to e-government. Camden won the Local Government Chronicle’s Council of the Year award in 2002.

The ICT department established a corporate e-government unit called the E-Services Development Team in July 2000. This unit is driving the process of development of electronic services in Camden. The Unit has also been involved in the instigation of a pan-London partnership of E-government called London Connects and leads the Central London Partnership, a sub regional group of London connects made up of the five central London Authorities. Members of the Camden E-Services team also sit on a number of national advisory bodies including the Office of the E-Envoy’s local reference group.

Current activity

Camden has actively developed e-democracy services with an online portal for consulting young people and was one of the first local authorities to webcast its council meetings. Camden was chair of the pan-European Telecities working group on e-democracy between 2001 and 2003. It has a long standing relationship in working with Professor Stephen Coleman of the Oxford Internet Institute in developing e-democracy policy and is currently working on an HM Treasury-funded project to create an open source e-democracy toolkit. The toolkit will comprise of three components:

- A system that enables community groups to have their own website with polling and surveying capability. The purpose of this tool is to enhance the capacity of the community to engage in online democratic debate and to increase social capital.
- An online citizens’ panel that will enable online questionnaires and deliberations amongst a demographically representative group of Camden citizens.
- A system that will enable local representatives to create their own websites, again with deliberative functionality.
Current thinking

Please note that this represents the current thinking of the author and cannot be taken as council policy

We have reached a plateau in e-democracy research in that we largely understand how to construct a chat room, or online consultation system using the existing technologies and the results of a large number of pilots are enabling a greater understanding in the skills required for moderators and users to utilise these systems more effectively. Whilst there is still much to do it is largely confined to fine-tuning of systems rather than any radical or far-reaching research into democratic practice online.

It is interesting to note that to an increasing degree, discussions around e-democracy are focused much more on the role of democracy than on the role of technology. This is most probably a symptom of the increasing sense that democratic practices are largely un-modernised and in many parts of the western world are routed in practices that belong in the nineteenth century. The new media of cyberspace and mobile telephony has disrupted the asynchronous world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in a way that has been both rapid and dramatic. The political systems that were designed for a linear and hierarchical policy-making are not able to cope with the synchronous and devolved world that is emerging to take advantage of the new technologies. To understand both the impacts and the potential benefits of the new technologies on democracy it is necessary to build a new paradigm that does not try to interpret policy-making as part of ‘top-down versus bottom-up’ but as a component of a complex adaptive system.

There is no doubt that the democratic system is currently not adapting to the new environment at the same rate as the commercial sector. An example of this is the effect of the anti-globalisation movement on companies who are exponents of globalisation and the contrasting reaction of the political establishment. The focus of the anti-globalisation movement is the leaders of the G8 group of countries and a number of worldwide corporations. The effect on G8 leaders has been to prompt them to move their meetings first behind increasing fortifications then to areas of the world that are less and less accessible for protestors and finally to states with dubious democratic accountability.

Contrast this to the reaction of one of their favourite corporate targets - fashion-chain Gap - who have recently published on the Internet the efforts that they have been making in ensuring that their supplier factories are conforming to health and safety regulations and local laws on pay (www.gapinc.com). A key part of the publication highlights what they feel that they could improve and do better in subsequent years. The Gap’s response is not as a response to some direct demand of the anti-globalisation movement or an organised protest outside Gap stores but as recognition that ‘the buzz about the company was not very positive’. The ‘buzz’ meant finding themselves featured on websites such as ‘www.behindthelabel.org’ and a decline in sales in their stores. Similarly Starbucks responded by sourcing its coffee from ‘Fair Trade’ accredited merchants. In the same period of time there have been no policies produced by the G8 that address any of the issues of labour exploitation, unfair trade subsidies nor has there been any serious effort to enter into deliberation about these issues.

The study of complex adaptive systems is new, but there is some common consensus amongst researchers as to what are the five most important defining characteristics.
1. Complex adaptive systems are never engineered from scratch. Rather, they evolve out of simpler forms through natural selection, increasing their complexity in response to competitive pressures to survive.

2. Adaptive systems work from the bottom up. Despite our persistent attempts to discover them, there are no centralized controls to coordinate behaviour. The synchronization of birds in flight results from a few simple rules that are followed by every bird in a flock; the notion of a lead bird is a scientific myth.

3. Adaptive systems are highly robust, with collective behaviour emerging from the interaction of a great many components. These systems not only survive errors, they thrive on them. If a local aberration offers improved performance, it quickly spreads throughout the system.

4. Adaptive systems tend to hover right on the edge of control, being easily nudged out of equilibrium but quickly righting themselves after a disruption. Some nudges push them into a new and more adaptive state, which is how they evolve as a whole.

5. Adaptive systems exhibit emergent properties—characteristics that are not found in their elements. An example of an emergent property is the wetness that appears when two gases, hydrogen and oxygen, are combined to form water. More interesting examples are the emergence of life out of molecular interactions and the emergence of consciousness out of the interactions of neurons.

The effect of the Internet on business eco-systems has been profound in that it has disrupted both temporal and hierarchical relationships that were previously dominant within the system. To date this has not happened within representative democracies. The existing systems have a monopoly that prevents the emergence of new systems. Unlike in the business world EU Competition Commissioner Mario Monti cannot tell the UK government, or any other government for that matter, to ‘unbundle’ itself to allow a new, more efficient e-democracy some space to flourish in the market place. Therefore in considering e-democracy within the context of a complex adaptive system there is a layer of complexity that is perhaps not present in any of the other models. One of the questions that need to be asked is at what level can the old technology of democracy absorb the new technologies before it becomes overwhelmed with complexity and can no longer adapt? What is clear is that no government would willingly become the subject of an experiment that potentially could bring about the total collapse of the existing system. Therefore we need to be able to model policy-making in a more complex way than that suggested in OECD (2003).

The proposal is to create an Agent-Based Computational Democracy (ACD) to study the e-democracy process through computational modelling using an evolving system of autonomous interacting agents with learning capabilities. The principal purpose of this would be to create the framework for a normative ACD as a computational laboratory within which alternative institutions, democratic designs, and organizational structures in general can be studied and tested with regard to their effects on individual behaviour and social welfare. This normative concern complements a descriptive concern with actually observed policy-making by seeking deeper possible explanations not only as to why certain policies have been observed to evolve and have an impact, but also why others have not.

Conclusion

Without a better understanding of how e-democracy can work effectively we will be trapped in a cycle of constant piloting and evaluation of tools with similar features. If we are to accept the complex adaptive systems paradigm then this would imply that we need to create software that is capable of meeting this challenge. At the very least this requires a more object-orientated
approach to the gathering of user requirements and to the creation of the system itself. Properly implemented e-democracy should have the capacity to speed up the policy making process and also make it more adaptive to its environment and in the process make both the government and the executive more accountable and responsive to the needs of the citizens. Poorly implemented it has the capacity to undermine the efficacy of the democratic process.

References


Yuri Misnikov, ICT-for-Development Coordinator, Democratic Governance Regional Programme, UNDP Regional Centre, Bratislava

Establishing Productive e-Democracy Linkages between Technology, Society and the Economy

1. The Declaration of Principles for the UNESCO/ITU-sponsored World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) starts with a statement that *building the Information Society is a new global challenge in the new Millennium* and declares a common desire and commitment to build a new kind of society, the Information Society, premised on the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Millennium Declaration, and characterized by universal access to and use of information for the creation, accumulation and dissemination of knowledge.¹

2. Whatever people may think of the WSIS outcome, the above reference to human rights and access to information as fundamental democratic values is critical in recognizing the growing importance and impact of ICTs on the way societies have been developing until now. This is especially important for less democratic countries and regions where ICTs can be fairly advanced technologically, but are not necessarily used for public goods.

3. The notion of a ‘public good’ could be seen as a key to establishing productive linkages between technology, society and the economy, as well as citizens and authorities. Public goods endangered by new ICTs that are borderless in principle, and need to be considered at global, regional (supra-national), national and local (grass-roots) levels, can provide better understanding of structures, channels and content for new emerging societal processes and institutions.

4. It is worthwhile to remember that computers – both mainframes and PCs – have not themselves led to the information revolution and prompted democracy-related issues. These systems were widely but narrowly used for computing and information storage in the 1970s and 80s to support scientific research, accounting, databases management, etc. It was only with the advent in the 1990s of the ‘communication’ component of ICT, offering new possibilities to exchange information and diversify its content, coupled with the falling costs for regular consumer, that ICTs started to change governance practices, as well as criteria related to these practices.

5. ICTs have rapidly become a public good that is increasingly affordable for many people and countries. This has initially been related to the Internet, but more and more involves other new digital technologies such as digital radio and TV. The questions raised include: Whether, and how extensively, digital tools will allow us to construct digital networks (national and international)? Whether the Internet and associated digital networks will be gradually transformed into a basic utility in a similar way to energy and water? Will these utilities be private or public? How will these will be regulated? What will be the price tag? And what impact will it have on societal organization and business conduct?

¹ See document WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/4-E (www.itu.int/wsis).
6. Though ‘the information society perspectives, objectives and characteristics … vary considerably, they are all based upon a common premise – that the extensive use of advanced telecommunication networks for the communication of vast amounts of information will enable significant improvements in economic productivity, and provides a wave of opportunities for economic, social and individual growth’. In combination with broadcasting media, this may bring a possibly additional intriguing impetus to advance information society even further, in which it is implied that e-democracy is part of the above process, at least of ‘…social and individual growth’.

7. However, the question is whether e-democracy – and via that traditional democratic values described in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – should be put as a primary objective? A new kind of society, the information society, is calling for a new kind of governance – e-governance. It is not yet clear what the relationship will be between the notions of ‘information society’, ‘e-democracy’, ‘e-governance’, ‘e-economy’, etc. Presumably, governance, first of all democratic – or good – governance, is gaining priority and becoming a new challenge for global and regional bodies, but especially for national governments.

8. It is assumed that ‘electronic’ governance, or in short ‘e-governance’, is an instrument of an information society in the form of governance principles, strategies, systems and tools that enable the use of ICTs in mutual interactions between and among the key members of the society – state, citizens and businesses – to strengthen democracy and support development.

9. Thus, e-governance could be viewed as an e-democracy instrument within a broader and holistic concept of an open information society, which brings the benefits of ICTs to all its members and ultimately strengthens democratic [good] governance. The principal role of e-governance in strengthening democracy is: (a) to increase people’s participation in state affairs at all levels, especially in local governance; (b) to make the state more accountable to its citizens; and (c) to strengthen democracy by making authorities more representative.

10. It is also assumed that those countries that are unable to prioritize the information society and related good-governance values through e-democracy as a transformation objective cannot fully seize the leapfrogging development potential offered by new ICTs and, as a result, will risk lag behind even further. Consequently, this may further exacerbate such traditional development problems as social exclusion and inequality and economic disparities between rural and urban areas. Moreover, dividing lines may cross over national frontiers and lead to wider inter- and intra-regional development gaps and eventually harm regional cooperation processes. There could be other consequences, which are hard to predict at present.

11. Thus, as opposed to traditional democracy confined within nation states, e-democracy has clearly a global nature as a global [public] good going beyond national frontiers. Yet

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3 The term ‘digital’ could be used instead; other terms being increasingly introduced include ‘mobile’, or ‘m’ as a prefix, meaning the use of mobile phone and wireless networks converged with the Internet for information transmission, such as for cellular phones or hand-held computers (PDAs) with in-built wireless functionality.
it is not clear what this new global dimension could mean for democracy as such. The WSIS has debated, and will continue debating, the Internet governance issues, which may lead to the establishment of new arrangements in the future, for example a UN body to deal with e-governance issues. It is not clear what impact new global rules of Internet governance could potentially have on local democratic practices and processes and how that would be in line with, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

12. The primary objective of e-governance activities could be seen to take full benefit of the existing and prospective digital networks and associated digital content in the creation of open information societies to support and expand democratic governing practices in the interest of as many people as possible, especially for the poor through technology-based electronic public services.

13. ICTs and related telecommunication and other digital networks are considered to be a major driving force for building information societies and economies. Yet it is not clear whether these are also understood and recognized as a new factor in improving existing governance practices. National e-strategies may state this general provision, but as a rule don’t provide any further clarifications and implementation mechanisms, with the exception of the loosely associated e-services. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), for instance, seeks to support only those societal governing principles that encourage democracy through initiatives such as: people’s participation in public sector management; empowering businesses, citizens and communities with new ICT-enabled instruments; and making governments not only more efficient and effective but also, in the first instance, transparent and accountable. Or, in other words, when citizens as clients and partners of the government assess its work through the provision of new ICT-based services.

14. For UNDP, in its development and governance work, the key question is: How can rapid technological change be accommodated in a timely way by relevant societal adaptation and organizational innovation processes – and what policy responses the governments and entire societies are expected to design and implement? In other words: How can traditional governance practices use new digital content and networks ultimately for e-governance practices? More specifically, the question is not just how e-content and digital networks will improve the delivery of public services, but rather: How can new e-content be used to meet people’s needs, including public e-services, to promote democratic governance – especially transparency and inclusion, given their high impact on poverty alleviation and anti-corruption? However, the ultimate question is that, even when people have communication channels and governments are listening to its citizens: Will actual government policies be changed to better accommodate democratic governance principles?

15. Just as there is no universally-accepted model of democratic governance, equally there is no single e-governance model that would suit all countries, which are at different stages of development with varying degrees of democratic principles applied in real or declared governance practices. It is not yet clear to what extent local traditions and customs will impact the adoption of new ICTs and whether conventional democratic practices that have been shaped over the past decades could be changed. This is an important question especially with regard to the former USSR and other transition countries as well as traditional developing countries, with their overwhelming poverty and potential for conflicts. There is little information available and many lessons should
be learned to underpin the fundamental tendencies and patterns, especially changing traditional paradigms.

16. In the context of developing and transition countries that don’t yet have sustainable rule-of-law-based democracies and functioning market economies, the application of e-governance tools could be used to strengthen people’s participation in decision-making and to increase transparency of governments and the public sector. Practice shows that simple two-way interactive online services implemented under well thought out e-government initiatives and provided to citizens and businesses either by the state or private sector (on behalf of the state through public–private partnerships) have positive impacts in expanding the very basis of government-citizen communication and raising awareness among people about the empowerment potential of ICTs in general. Thus, advocacy and public awareness are crucial stages in building understanding about open information societies.

17. It is implied that in those transition societies that have managed to develop relatively stable democracies, notably the EU accession countries and the countries in accession negotiations with the EU, the main benefit of technology-based e-governance systems is seen in the building of a full-fledged open information society by providing a wide range of online public services, in fostering mutually effective public–private partnerships, in achieving visible economic gains and in enhancing representative democracy by increasing rather low levels of electoral participation. However, it is not clear whether the policy objective is to change fundamentally current governance practices and models.

18. However, most of the existing technology-based e-governance tools are working within the existing governance structures developed prior to the advent of new ICTs and especially the Internet. Therefore, the true benefits of ICTs will be felt if new governance strategies and structures are created to release the full potential of ICTs in connecting all members of a society and thereby changing the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed. The latter should be viewed as true partners, clients and stakeholders in governance.

19. In spite of the described differences in terms of the status and degree of democratization, it is understood that many countries are in the process of designing and implementing national (and regional/sub-regional where appropriate) strategies and action plans in the area of the information society in general and e-governance in particular. Many countries, including developing and least-developed ones, have come to realize that ICT offers a chance to tap into a big, but almost as yet unutilized, leapfrogging potential even in the current circumstances characterized by low penetration levels, weak capacities and many other pressing non-ICT development problems. As the Digital Development Opportunity Report (www.opt-init.org) underlines, if ICTs are properly and strategically deployed they can serve as an effective enabler of development and can create a development dynamics, which eventually will help solve ‘traditional’ development problems spelled out in the UN Millennium Goals and Targets.

20. Specific e-governance applications and tools may vary as generic governance practices and types of democracies change. However, it is assumed that ICTs, particularly digital telecommunication networks and, as appropriate, broadcasting networks, are available and affordable for use by governments, people and businesses – or are becoming increasingly available and affordable. It is also assumed that more and more people,
governments, communities and businesses will be using various ICTs, especially the Internet, in their everyday activities and life.

21. In the context of e-governance and e-democracy, the wider and deeper use of ICTs in those countries that are at initial stages of creating an information society will mean a growing number of government-hosted websites performing largely a one-way communication function, with relatively little online government services offered to citizens and businesses through specifically-designed web portals. Penetration levels of Internet and PCs apart, the increasing number of e-services and successful public–private partnership schemes will indicate the progress in improving public sector management practices to be better positioned to serve citizens, communities and businesses.

22. As long as the diffusion and penetration of ICTs and the Internet are increasing both within public and private sector, and basic capabilities are created to manage new technologies, government-hosted websites can start generating rapidly increasing content, which as a rule targets a too wide and fluid audience. That, in turn, prompts authorities to streamline web-based mass communication content into cohesive e-government services.4

23. Connecting to people via ICTs should mean considering them as the government’s clients instead of governing objects. That brings governments closer to citizens and eventually strengthens democratic governance on the whole, provided that e-governance tools contain a functionality that allows assessments of the quality and efficiency of public services delivered by the government. While recognizing the importance of monetary returns and savings, it is important to note that assessments of impacts of this kind of investment in initiatives with high public value should not be subject to cost-benefit analysis alone, but should rather be viewed from the public-return point of view in the first place.

24. The growing volume of web-based information available on government websites does not automatically lead to consolidation of such information and its transformation into online services, unless the government conducts a conscious and pro-active policy to this end. Some minimal critical mass of web-based information resources is only a prerequisite for rolling out citizen-centric e-services. A special role of any government seriously thinking of successful e-governance projects should be to promote transparency and openness of the public information held by the government well in advance, or at least in parallel with, the provision of that information. Defining the scope and content of public information and ensuring access to it (for instance through Public

4 This probably occurs when the Internet penetration rate (which until now has been significantly dependent on availability of fix-telephone lines) is lower than 30 percent, which is a sort of critical mass, for example, as demonstrated in Estonia. If Internet penetration levels exceed 30 percent, the government finds itself (directly and indirectly) under pressure from people and businesses to consolidate disparate agency-based websites into a system of inter-departmental connected portals offering online services cutting across individual sectors of society and economy. The advent of wireless technology may potentially overcome the lack of landline telephony and offer Internet connectivity for anyone who is located within the coverage area (geographically up to 50 km and more if terrain allows) with no need of fixed landlines (telephone or cable). This kind of one-time investment brings benefits for many at a time, instead of investing in multiple fixed connections. While commercial viability, security, administration, ownership and regulation of wireless networks is under debate, the public value of this technology cannot be overestimated.
Information/Freedom of Expression Acts) must accompany the development of any citizen-focused web portal.

25. Some communities and population groups may need special kinds of services delivered directly to them at grassroots level containing locally-appealing content in local languages, which will actually empower them. In this way, the meaning of the ‘e’ prefix can easily be extended to mean empowering and enabling, in addition to electronic.

Some other questions of policy and practice to be answered in order to understand a fundamental one: Can new e-instruments help to strengthen democracy?

• Can democracy be regulated as the Internet could be potentially (and is regulated in many instances now by some countries)?
• Will e-democracy and e-governance change the relationship between citizens and authorities? Will there be more involvement of citizens in public affairs? Will it mean more self-organization by people through virtual digital means and networks?
• How to ensure that people’s opinions are taken into account in policy making? Being heard does not necessarily mean that citizens’ views are mainstreamed into policies.
• Citizens as consumers. Any implications? Digital content is being protected by large corporations. How does that correspond with the free flow of information. Should the Universal Declaration of Human Rights be amended to take new digital opportunities and threats into account? With the global ‘digital divide’ in terms of access gradually disappearing, a new type of internal (domestic) divide is on the rise, with more focus on content rather than on accessibility. What are the new ‘digital rights’ and ‘digital responsibilities’ on both sides?
• What should be the role of advocacy, education, training and public awareness? What new competencies and mindsets are required?
• Will the essence of public-sector and related services change? What is the relationship with public-sector management and democratic participation?
• What impact will e-democracy have not only on democratic processes and practices but also on traditional institutions?
• What control should citizens have over ‘e’? In elections for example? This is a highly technological area – could and would citizens have control over technological aspects of e-governance and e-democracy systems owned by the government? Say, in overseeing how electronic voting is done (where there is a lot of potential for abuse)?
• Should information content and communication channels be considered as a public commodity and/or public good? In some countries, there is a fee to access legal information? Will people have to pay for democracy? And also for e-democracy as a commodity?
• Should ICT competency and skills be a basic literacy requirement?
• What is the role of cultures and customs? There are many types of traditional democracy. Will this mean that there will be many types of e-democracy?
• Relationship with the new e-economy. The market economy and democracy have traditionally been bundled together. What’s new with e-democracy?
• What are the regional (inter-regional) dimensions of the information-society impact on the proliferation of democratic practices and e-governance. In the EU, common regional policies under the eEurope Action Plans have had enormous impact. Is it applicable elsewhere and should be encouraged in other regions?
• Is e-democracy about citizens or governments? Does e-democracy mean more democracy or better democracy or more diverse democracy, etc.?
What new partnerships and forms are required? New alliances? What is the role of the private sector and large multinationals?

What should be the role of citizens’ associations (peer-to-peer networks)? Can there be virtual political parties?

How should policies be designed and implemented in e-democracy? Is it enough to be part of national e-strategies (national e-government action plans and information society policies)?

What is the role of technology? How can government capacities accommodate and use the benefits of new technologies when the latter is developing much faster than the former? How to encourage organizational innovation in the public sector? Should the limits of public sector structures and processes be expanded to achieve greater governance and services flexibility?

And perhaps the most important question: How to teach e-democracy?
Electronic democracy is a new term in the information age. Democracy defined by Webster’s as 'a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation. Electronic democracy is simply the use of technology tools to facilitate democratic activities.

With this broad definition, technology can be and has been applied to virtually every facet of the democratic process, from pre-election campaigning using sophisticated websites for candidates, interest groups and parties to post-election government access to elected officials, government services and proceedings. Most recently the election process itself has been inundated with electronic voting machines replacing mechanical machines in response the Help America Vote Act of 2002. The requirements for this directly affect State and local governments as the entities responsible for conducting elections and, with the advent of electronic voting, open the door for future changes in the election process. The changes brought about by the use of technology, however, are not without controversy particularly concerning age-old questions of voting security and appropriate voting processes that cannot be tampered with. This has been a particularly sensitive issue in Maryland when serious security issues were raised concerning the State’s Diebold electronic voting machines by a study conducted by Johns Hopkins University. Montgomery County was one of the first of four counties to have piloted the new machines. This paper addresses three key areas of e-democracy: the effects of technology on the election process; the advent of electronic voting; and the use of technology in government processes that enhance voter/citizen access to elected officials, proceedings and services.

Pre-election use of technology

With the advent of the Internet and its ability to reach millions of people, it has provided a new channel for individuals and organizations to easily communicate with each other or provide new channels for information formally provided only by a few, namely the network news organizations. This has allowed political candidates, special interest groups and political parties to host their own websites offering voters self-selected avenues by which to receive information and make political contributions. The Internet and cable television have both provided several new channels to voters to receive information. The effects of this new media on local, state or national politics have not yet been well defined and measured.

Other recent changes in automation and standardization of voter registration systems have allowed sophisticated analysis of voting districts. In Maryland a statewide voter registration system was created in 2000 as a result of the Motor Voter Act. Formerly, counties kept their own registration systems of varying accuracy and levels of automation. With the new requirement for a standardized and automated voter registration system came the effort to clean up records. With an accurate standardized and geocoded voter registration system maps of voter demographic data could be created. In Montgomery County these maps and information are used extensively for voters in determining which precinct they belong to and therefore their polling location, but are also used by elected officials, candidates and parties in redistricting and election activities. This detailed geocoded information has allowed for fairly sophisticated targeted campaigning and a modern day version of ‘gerrymandering’ techniques in redistricting.
Along with an automated voter registration system, Maryland also invested in creating a new automated and web-accessible Campaign Finance System. This system created new processes for reporting campaign finance information which led to some turnover in campaign financial directors as the new processes were fairly stringent and the technology, to some, overwhelming. Anyone can now access the financial reports for each candidate and this information is often immediately reported in several news publications and reports as soon as it is periodically posted on the web. The immediacy of this information to the public is not lost on candidates who wish to reflect positive fund-raising activities or to their competitors who wish to obtain information on who has contributed to whom. Again the effect of this type of information and the new media in which it is made available is not yet known in a measurable way.

**Election process changes – electronic voting**

Nowhere has there been more controversy or election process change than in the advent and employment of electronic voting machines. Montgomery County has now run eight elections using the Diebold Electronic voting machines. Spawned in part by the close 2000 presidential election and the controversy of the mechanical machines in Florida, Governor Parris Glendenning, ordered the State Board of Elections to bid and purchase electronic voting machines to pilot in four counties in Maryland of which Montgomery County was the largest with approximately 900,000 residents. The machines were used in the Gubernatorial election of 2002 without a lot of controversy and were generally well-received by the voting public. However, the new machines were costly and required tremendous assistance by technical staff that had to be assigned to every precinct along with more traditional election judges and volunteer staff. The new technology was difficult for, often, older election judges and volunteer staff who were not familiar with the technologies of smart cards, electronic machines, tabulating votes from various machines or modem-in results to the central office.

Only after the 2002 election did specific concerns arise over the security of the new machines, the software, and the election process developed for the new machines. Specifically, a report was released in 2003 by Avi Rubin of Johns Hopkins University raising concerns that the Diebold software lacked a secure computing language. As a result of this study and criticality of ensuring a safe and secure election process, Governor Robert Erlich halted use of the machines until an independent security study could be performed. A report done by SAIC was released and changes were made by the State Board of Elections regarding the election processes in time to run the 2004 Primary. While Diebold contended that the Rubin study was based on a previous release of software and the state made several changes to the election process, the damage was done and voter concerns over the systems security became evident and still continue. Interest groups on both sides have materialized on the issue and state and local governments are faced with resolving the issues to ensure voter trust in the new systems.

A complicating and significant part of ensuring secure and well run elections using the new electronic machines is the tremendous business process changes to the election process itself that had to be overcome. In fact, several jurisdictions did not overcome the complexity of the new processes of using correct electronic ballots, training the election judges and poll staffers on the new processes, dealing with machines that break, and being able to successfully modem results. Added to this, the cost of the new machines and additional staff needed to manage the new electronic process was an awakening for many jurisdictions. In Montgomery County the election set-up took nearly 1000 man-hours of additional labor to test and ready each machine in addition to assigning a technical staff person to assist election judges on tabulating and transmitting results. The State of Maryland is currently evaluating printing a receipt for each
voter which would require all machines to be retrofitted and would require new machines to be purchased to cover the additional time it would take to vote. These costs are currently unfunded.

Despite these issues, however, electronic voting is here to stay. As with any new system implementation, process and technology adjustments are made in response to legitimate concerns and communities will adjust and adopt these new methods. The new electronic voting systems and voter registration systems will evolve and it is probable that old processes may erode and/or evolve into new ones that take advantage of a digital voting system. For instance, if a voter registration system is a central database, does it really matter where a voter votes as long as they identify themselves with proper identification and address? Will the precinct polling process itself become obsolete in the future? Will the polling locations be better connected in the future so that real-time or near-real-time tabulation is possible with voting results that can be immediately fed to the press via the Internet? Montgomery County now posts results on the Internet as soon as they are available after the polls closes but there is a great deal of pressure from candidates and the media to receive results throughout the day, as with mechanical systems. These questions and others are sure to surface as communities become more comfortable with the electronic machines and their digital capabilities become more evident.

Post-election – governance and access

The Internet and electronic age have reached government in many forms. Most governments have websites with posted information, direct e-mail to elected and public officials and a plethora of web based service offerings. Montgomery County offers four cable television channels that broadcast County Council sessions, County Executive news conferences and speeches, as well as hosting a variety of public forums on salient issues. In addition to these offerings, the website allows access to many government documents such as the budget, Council agendas and packets on all council actions, public hearing schedules, community forums and live video and audio streaming of Council sessions and key County Executive speeches. Efforts are made to include in such forums language translators and/or hearing-impaired translations. New systems are now being used to notify citizens of emergencies via pagers, voice and/or text messages. Over half of all correspondence comes in as electronic mail. In a nutshell, Montgomery County has made and continues to make its government accessible to the community in a variety of different ways. Other jurisdictions have done likewise to ensure their government is more accessible to the citizens. But having all these efforts to reach the citizen actually increased citizen interaction with their government. After posing this question to the Montgomery County Election Director, the answer seems to be ambiguous. The voter turnout remains about 40 percent for national elections, down from its high in 1960 of 60 percent.

Europe seems to be ahead of the US in using the electronic media to take issues directly to voters. Use of e-petitions or interactive policy input web forums seems to have taken hold in Europe but has not quite done so here in the US. While the US has made great strides and is a leader in the offering of government services online it still has a way to go regarding the use of the electronic media for input on key policy issues. e-Democracy is a broad term that covers the many facets of the democratic process. Its effects are not yet well understood though are real and will continue to grow and evolve with both positive and negative results.
The Impossible Dream: Measuring the Power of Internet Deliberations in Setting Public Agendas and Influencing Public Planning and Policies

When the Internet became a generally useful tool in the mid 1990s, there were many who saw its potential to benefit the practice of what is called, in somewhat of a false dichotomy, representative and direct democracy at all levels of governance.

It was clear from the beginning of this ‘movement’, that the Internet, with its two way interactive properties, could be used by governments to make many of its services available to citizens online. Of course, many polities had already begun their ‘e-governance’ phase much earlier than that as Dutton et al. (1987) described in great detail in their book *Wired Cities*.

The new, more public-friendly Internet, however, took ‘digital democracy’ to a new level and has proved to be, by far, the preferred means by which new forms and degrees of representative democracy can interact with the public in just about every facet of government from renewing driving licenses to downloading tax forms. Even the most modern of ‘democracies’ – from Switzerland to Singapore – provide numerous efficient services via the web. Indeed, the list of potential uses of government information and services provided via the Internet seems to grow exponentially each year.

Of course, there were many other uses by which the Internet was seen as helping to improve the quality of democracy, particularly in terms of empowering citizens in helping their representatives, various and sundry government officials, and themselves make planning or policy decisions for their polities. Legislators were quickly made aware of the value, for instance, of having ‘chats’ with online constituents. E-mails to from citizens to legislators and vice versa have become commonplace. Political parties use the Internet to help with informing party members and in helping organize party activities, including campaigns for candidates for offices. And, of course, there have been a number of experiments already whereby the Internet has been used in actual political situations for voting for candidates as well. The list is almost inexhaustible

As we all know, one of the most important properties of any democracy, whether representative or direct or some hybrid or degree of both, is the importance of informed deliberation before voting on any kind of issue, problem or plan. Legislative assemblies routinely engage in debate. Political campaigns are premised on the assumption that voters will cast ballots on what they learned during the campaign. City planners hold hearings where evidence is presented and weighed before plans are made and implemented, and so on.

Thus, among the many questions that need to be researched and experimented with, is the question of how the Internet has been used to date to enhance the deliberative process in democratic processes or experiments along these lines. William Dutton, Jay Blumler and Kenneth Kraemer were eerily prescient in 1987 when they – during the era of ARPANET – said that ‘there are inherent biases in the newer electronic media that reinforce more democratic and decentralized modes of communication (and) that the new media provide the capability for
telecommunications to reinforce face-to-face (F2F) patterns of communication' (Dutton et al. 1987: 22). So, has this pro-democratic ‘bias’ inherent in the fundamental infrastructure of the new telecommunications technologies, i.e., the Internet, produced more, greater or better forms or degrees of democracy in the ‘Wired, wired West?’

Generally speaking, the answer to this must be, at this point in time, ‘not much’, if by that one means more electronic, Internet-based deliberative democracy where the input made a significant penetration into the halls and minds of those who govern. There have been a smattering of innovative citizen deliberation projects that have had (or are in the process of having) direct impact on the public decision making processes of some polity. But by far the clearest examples of this phenomenon are face to face (F2F), not electronic in whole or in part and when, perchance, this does occur via some electronic input, it is frequently accidental or serendipitous and difficult to measure since there was no way to construct measurement instruments for something that is unexpected.

One of the most celebrated of the high citizen empowerment experiments is the citizen budget-making forums in the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil. As part of the ideology of the Socialist Workers Party in that country, the citizens assemble in various neighborhoods (all are welcome as in New England town meetings) to discuss, debate, exchange information and then vote on how the city’s annual revenue should be spent, e.g., on what, where, and how much. The results of these forums, after being linked and collated, are binding on the city government.

This process continues at the present time and is widely cited and studied and there is greater and greater replication throughout Brazil and even in other countries. What is more, the person most responsible for this, the former mayor of Porto Alegre, was recently elected the president of Brazil via a nationwide electronic computer system that processed 90 million votes on 1 day and which has not had any hint of fraud and was considered by neutral foreign observers to be almost flawless (less than 2% errors found and no fraud claimed by the losers).

Last year, the Parliament of British Columbia decided to allow the citizens of their province to decide whether or not to change their system of elections and if so, what kind of system they preferred. Thus, they created the Citizens Assembly to do this job. This Assembly is comprised of two citizens from each electoral district in the province chosen by random selection and they are paid for their work and time. During this past year, they have been conducting open hearings throughout British Columbia, sending out e-mail newsletters and press releases on their progress, and listening to a wide range of alternatives. When they complete their hearings and their deliberative process they will either recommend no change or some particular change, i.e., a whole new system for elections. If their view is the latter, this proposal will be put to the general public for a for or against vote in a referendum.

There are two other excellent examples of how F2F citizens’ deliberative panels (chosen by stratified sampling techniques) have impacted heavily upon legislation. The first is the Danish Technology Boards who convene stratified samples of citizens into consensus panels whose deliberations and recommendations have strongly influenced their sponsor, The Danish Parliament. According to the founder and initial director of the program, Lars Kluver, most of the Boards’ recommendations have found their way into law (Becker and Slaton 2000: 184).

The other are the ‘Planungszelle’ (Planning Cells) invented by Dr. Peter Dienel of Wuppertal University in Germany. These F2F citizens’ panels are sponsored by various municipalities throughout that country to help influence the planning process for their futures. According to Dr. Dienel, since most polities do not usually choose to utilize this method, when they do, they
It would seem that the Internet, as widely used as it has come to be, and with its strong, pro-democratic structural bias, could offer numerous examples of equally successful public input into a vast array of public decision making. After an intensive study of many communications experiments designed to empower citizens, three American researchers (Johnson, Hays and Hays 1998: 227) had this to say in 1998: ‘The Internet offers the greatest potential for reconnecting the public—at least those with access to it—with the political process. The Internet connects individuals through Usenet news groups, electronic bulletin boards, issue forums and chat rooms that create virtual communities and afford people and unregulated platform to express their views. Grassroots activists employ the Internet to proselytize the unconverted, inform their supporters, and urge them to action. However, public officials have so far done little to effectively use email or the Internet to communicate directly with voters. Currently, their presence is largely limited to their homepages which are little more than 24-hour cyber-campaign offices.’

Their book covered a broad range of experiments designed to ‘engage the public’ in an informed and usually deliberative manner in public decision making. That study was done six years ago. Has the situation changed much since then? We doubt it. In the next section of this paper we will take a look at several prominent experiments in Sweden and the United States that at least made an attempt to plug Internet deliberations into something other than electronic discussion for the sake of electronic discussion.

The Swedish experiments: designs, findings and lessons learned.

1. Kalix

Swedish experiments involving the Internet in the setting of public agendas vary from case to case. One of the most intriguing and celebrated occurred in a small borough in the very North of Sweden called Kalix. It occurred in 1999-2000. What happened was that during the elections in 1998 there seemed to be some major concerns about bringing about a ‘greener Kalix.’ This grew from a growing sense among the citizens that a ‘softer’ community centre was necessary. In other words, the people were getting fed up with too much automobile traffic and an increasing density of people in the city’s core. Thus a new political coalition was elected with this in mind.

Not only was the newly elected government convinced that something needed to be done about this problem, they were also convinced—and said so during the political campaign—that the public needed to be involved in consultation with the government about what the problem really was and perhaps what solutions there might be. What they had in mind were open hearings and web communications.

The first phase of this project took place in September 2000. The idea behind it was to be very open-ended about how to define or describe the problem. So, informative texts and graphics were distributed to the populace via public meetings, fax, e-mail, telephone and newspapers. The question was basically: ‘Are you in favour of change?’ There was no room made to discuss any costs to any such changes. In addition, the political parties themselves did not participate as such.
So, what happened? Almost 1,200 people participated in the ‘Kalix 1 Consultation’ – many by voting or commenting over the web. This was roughly 8% of the adult population. So, neither the process nor the result was anywhere near definitive and in the minds of many, it was a bit of a disappointment. Of course, how often do 8% of any city’s voters participate in any kind of city planning? Such is a rarity. But if the goal was to get substantial citizen input, Kalix 1 fell short.

It is our view (and the view of many in Kalix) that one major reason for the relatively small engagement was that the problem was already well known and there was not much interest generated by rehashing it. Let’s say it was fairly non-provocative. Also, there was not much deliberation either in F2F groups or on the web.

So, a second consultative project was designed: Kalix 2. This time the problem was reframed in terms of the cost and how to pay for any such resurrection of the city centre. In other words, if you want a ‘Greener Kalix,’ should taxes be raised? Should they stay the same? Should taxes be lower? This topic definitely aroused more interest because it surely concerned all who paid those taxes. So, although the choice of the subject definitely was prompted by what the formulators felt would be of interest to the citizens, the range of alternatives that were offered were quite narrow and so was the range of the deliberative process.

The Internet was used extensively in Kalix 2. Information was posted about meetings (time and place), about whom to contact and how to do that, chat rooms were set up and used, and last but not least, people could vote on the issue from their home via the Internet as well as from public places as well. Every voter was given a password that could be used just once if they voted on the Internet.

Did it work? Well, the turnout was far greater and so was the level of interest. About 52% of the people of Kalix participated in some way. And of the 7000 participants, over 2000 were over the Internet (about 28%). What is most interesting, though, is that the public’s view was that change was possible but only a minor increase in taxes would be necessary. This demonstrates to us that the public was both constructive and responsible in their desires.

Did this project, with its Internet discussions as a part of the process, actually have any influence on the political leaders who designed it? Measurement is difficult in such situations. But at this point in time, it is difficult to see that there was any substantial follow-up to the Kalix experiments. So, what conclusions can we draw from all this?

- The choice of subject matter is an important one to consider when designing a public consultation process. The matter to be dealt with should be of common evident relevance to the citizenry and it should be specific enough, and provocative enough, to gain and maintain their interest.
- Although the political leaders seemed to support this consultation, the political parties did not and this may have had a significant effect both on the level of participation and the low impact.
- Unexpected and often constructive suggestions were made during both the F2F and Internet discussions.
- The agenda-setting was mainly done by the politicians.
- Once made attractive to the public, they participated fully and responsibly.
- Of course, since the project was ‘consultative,’ the political leaders could choose to listen or not in their final decision. Even well paid, expert consultants get ignored. The degree to which they chose to listen was hardly difficult since public opinion was not very different from what the politicians may have chosen themselves.
The Kalix consultations, however, must be seen as a successful experiment in public participation in a dialogue with city leaders. Also, the use of the Internet was a significant part of that process, not so much as an Internet deliberation, but as a part of a community interaction. Even so, the tiny influence of so much public participation was disappointing and left much to be hoped for in any future use of this methodology.

2. Kista

The public agenda setting process within the EU’s Cybervote project (www.eucybervote.org) was organized quite differently. Cybervote was a research project (partly funded by the European Union) that included representatives from seven European countries. The project was carried out from the year 2001 to the spring of 2003. Participants represented users, researchers and providers of technology. The focus was originally placed on the development of secure Internet voting software, and this focus remained central to the projects of most of the participating countries during the duration of the project. However, in the Swedish version, this was complemented by an interest in participation, discussion and agenda setting. Such a social approach varied from all the other nations’ projects which concentrated on technology.

There were three ‘user’ projects, one in Sweden. This was carried out in Kista, a northern suburb of Stockholm. It concentrated on citizen involvement in city planning (much like Kalix). Another unique aspect of the Kista part of the Cybervote project was that it only engaged elderly citizens in an attempt to deal with the ‘digital divide’ between the oldest and the younger generations.

With the help of local organizations of the elderly, we distributed invitations that said: ‘Do you want to join in the shaping of history?’ We mentioned the use of new technologies and told them they would be instructed in how to use them. It was a general appeal to the senior citizens to get involved in helping develop a new city plan for where they lived.

A sizable group turned out for the first meeting where the discussion centered on a variety of possible topics. Through this process a list of about a dozen subjects emerged. The next step was to get a much smaller sample of them into the new technology being tested by having this subgroup go through the list and establish priorities via computer conferencing. What they agreed upon were: (1) Local planning: parks or commercial; (2) public transportation: buses or trains; and (3) arts and culture: a new building for that or not. These priorities were disseminated through printed materials and via the Internet. A short study of this part of the project revealed that these elderly citizens did encounter problems in using these new machines, particularly in the voting aspects.

The main Kista trial took place in January 2003 where everyone who had pre-registered was invited to come to talk and vote. 236 showed up, not enough for any statistical analysis, but more than enough to show a deep interest in being able to participate in such an exercise, particularly one with a technological focus as this one had. Each person who came was given a password that they could use once to vote via the Internet. Their choices concerned the 3 topics listed above. The results showed clear majorities for certain alternatives concerning local planning choices that had been established by the senior citizens themselves. In fact, they were so pleased with their experience that many told us that they would like to do it again in the future.

In sum, we believe it can be said that although there are other Swedish experiments in citizen participation as well, it is usually citizens who are responding to agendas and ideas presented
from ‘higher up’. Citizen participation in the formulation of agendas and priorities is highly unusual. However, with the success of the Kalix 1 and 2 projects and the Kista project in involving surprisingly large numbers of citizens in helping set planning agendas, this may be the beginning of using the Internet for such matters in the Sweden of tomorrow.

The American experiments: Listening to the City and Minnesota E-Democracy

Web-based forums, chat-rooms, bulletin boards and many other methods of cyber-discussion are rife in American life. A veritable cyber-galaxy of them exists to talk about politics alone. Some are facilitated, most are not.

There can be no question that the availability and use of these Internet discussions has had some kind of impact on American politics. What kind and how much, however, are extremely difficult to conceptualize, much less measure with any degree of accuracy. One effect is certain however: there has been an enormous rise in ‘communities’ in America that are just about totally ‘online.’ The ‘virtual community’ is a phenomenon that really is beyond imagination. People from around the globe congregate in cyberspace to talk about and commiserate about everything and anything. In terms of politics, this phenomenon has such effects as mass ventilation of grievances, to massive feelings of being in touch with like minded political thinkers and activists, to massive interchanges between citizens and other citizens about local matters, to massive exchanges between citizens and a vast array of officials.

So? Does a quantum leap in cyber-discussion for the sake of cyber-discussion on a universe of political matters make the slightest bit of difference in Realpolitik? No one knows. Does it spur Karl Jung’s ‘collective subconscious?’ No one knows. Does it galvanize mass movements? Who knows? Do the most powerful people in any polity really care about it? Who really knows? Are ‘virtual communities’ more powerful than geographic, political communities of interest? No one knows. All these are matters that should be of intense political scientific interest, but little has been done to seriously investigate such matters because they are so incredibly hard to operationalize.

On the other hand, there are two rather large and long-running American experiments in cyber-discussion that are at least worth describing, commenting upon and comparing with the two Swedish experiments above.

1. Minnesota E-Democracy

The first is the oldest by far and the most established by far. It is called Minnesota E-Democracy and was founded by and still is operated by Stephen Clift, who has written and talked about it around the world for years now. In its first incarnation, it was an ‘election oriented website’ which put position papers from various state office candidates online, ‘hosted candidate e-debates via e-mail, and launched the MN-POLITICS e-mail discussion list.’ So, what does Clift (1999: 6) get out of years of this experience? ‘If ninety-nine percent of political discussion on the Internet is junk and disconnected from anything real, then our discussions are half junk. The miracle is that any of our online political discussions have any value whatsoever.’ And as far as any genuine measurement is concerned, he notes that ‘Ongoing academic research and analysis seems sparse, particularly from a quantitative perspective.’ Indeed.

The alter ego of this election type forum is a more generalized web discussion called Minnesota Issues Forum at www.e-democracy.org/mn-politics. Basically, this is an electronic, web-based forum, no more or no less. Clift, himself, likes to call it ‘a wired agora’. He is critical of the fact
that legislators, when online, do not try to get their many isolated e-mailing constituents together
to discuss the issue with other online constituents. It is the interconnection of citizens among
themselves, particularly at the neighborhood or town level, that Clift believes is ‘reconnecting’
geographic communities. He calls this the ‘interactive public commons’. Once again, no one
really knows if there are such phenomena, how to measure them, or their impact.

Actually, Clift admits, after a wealth of experience, that it is very difficult to get people to
continue coming into web forums on a regular basis. It usually takes an ‘explosive’ issue and the
best way to recruit recurrent users is via email lists with links to the forums. In fact, in ending his
thesis on the electronic agora, Clift concedes that ‘We started with the ‘common’ in Minnesota,
but in most places local/regional online political communication travels through private e-mail
networks and a limited number of public e-mail lists based on specific agencies’. Or as three
other researchers on this subject put it (Hale, Musso and Weare 1999: 105): ‘The crucial
question, however, is whether use of these technologies fosters ‘cyber-communities’ that bring
people together in sustained civic relationships, as opposed to encouraging fleeting or
anonymous social contacts’.

We asked Clift directly (whilst he was in Mongolia discussing these matters) if he could say that
he knew of any of his or anyone else’s e-forums having any evident impact on any kind of
agenda setting or similar policy making in the USA over the past decade. He said - via e-yak, of
course - ‘I think ‘agenda-setting’ is a lot easier to prove than a measure of influence on decision-
making.’ As comment on proof, he observed that when the present Mayor of Minneapolis
announced his candidacy for re-election, he did it online before his press conference. We’d
have to say that this kind of inference is about par for the course as far as empirical research is
concerned on this topic.

2. Listening to the City

The other online discussion or forum experiment was carried out by Weblab as a distinct but
integrated part of the ‘Listening to the City’ project in New York City in July 2002. This project,
designed and coordinated by AmericaSpeaks (www.americaspeaks.org), brought 4,500 citizens
who were chosen in a loosely stratified fashion to assemble at the Jacob Javits Center for one
day of deliberation over 6 proposals for rebuilding the World Trade Center site as presented by
the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC). These 6 proposals, with graphics, had
been posted CNN.com and USAToday.com for weeks and colorfully depicted in New York City
newspapers as well. The huge forum’s agenda was to see how the citizenry felt about them and
to report the results to LMDC in short order. However, an army of media that was covering the
event beat the official Report to the punch by letting the general public know what happened on
the early evening news and on all their websites.

The instant results were clear and negative. Through an elaborate process, there was an
obvious and thumbs-down response from an overwhelming percentage of those in attendance.
But there were also several positive directions to the LMDC: make the rebuilding of the site less
commercial; inspiring; and more of a memorial to those who died there.

Soon thereafter, the LMDC announced, along with statements by the Governor of New York and
the Mayor of New York City, that the plans would be scrapped and a whole new process
instituted that would adhere to the guidelines set forth by the AmericaSpeaks ETM. Actually,
according to some observers, the LMDC plans were already ‘dead on arrival’ at the ETM, but
that the ETM ‘crystallized’ or was a ‘watershed event’ that made this clear to one and all in one
huge media extravaganza.
Even before the event, *WebLab* had been conducting over 30 separate small group online forums on this very same subject as part of the comprehensive ETM that *AmericaSpeaks* had designed. In other words, it was an integral part of the process. That the results of the forums would be included in the official *AmericaSpeaks* Report to the LMDC was an important attraction to get participants and to keep them involved in the e-forums. That still begs the main question: Did the e-forums, even as part of a larger process of ‘agenda-setting’ for a major local/national issue, have any impact on the decision makers whatsoever?

Jed Miller, who was *WebLab*’s coordinator with *AmericaSpeaks*, is not certain. He knows that the results of the forums were definitely included in the official Report. But it was not the official Report that convinced the major decision makers to change their mind as much as the F2F ETM plus its widespread media coverage. The response of officials was almost immediate. They didn’t wait to read any Report. It was as clear as crystal that the public abhorred their initial proposals from even before the almost unanimous votes at the ETM. In addition, Miller told us in an e-mail that actually the e-forums differed significantly from the F2F, electronically enhanced public meeting in some very significant ways.

For example, according to him, there was a much stronger desire for much taller towers (‘due to a small but vocal portion of online members’) and a much greater resistance to letting the families of those who died have too great a say in what replaced the WTC. So, ironically, the web forums, albeit a small part of the whole process, came out much closer to predicting (not influencing) the ultimate decision by LMDC—which emphasized having the tallest tower in the world to be built on the site and giving the families of the victims much less of a say than they had at the major event.

In sum, we think we can say that Internet discussions have not even begun to make any real difference in either Sweden or the USA in terms of significantly empowering citizens as either agenda-setters or impacting on governmental priorities or policies. At the most, there are exceptions here and there, some of which we’re probably unaware. The only place where web-discussions probably have great influence are in policy and management decisions by global corporations over secure electronic highways that may include videoconferencing. These probably have political ramifications, but as far as the average citizen is concerned, they are totally out of that strong loop of power – virtually and/or really. For the most part, so far, what’s out there on ‘the electronic commons’ is a cosmos of unconnected, more or less chaotic political cyber-chatter that may be informative and therapeutic, but not of great political substance or significance.

Surely, however, this is a subject that is wide open for much rigorous and systematic research and we would urge that ample resources be allocated for much more sophisticated experiments that build in measurements for political impact.

**References**


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Andreas Papandreou, Assistant Professor of Environmental Economics, University of Athens, and member of Access2Democracy

Using Web-based Questionnaires to Promote e-Democracy

‘On the face of it, pragmatism provides a congenial philosophical basis for deliberative democracy, whose essence is the idea that the legitimacy of any collective decision should be sought in reflective acceptance on the part of the subject to the decision. The best way to ensure such acceptance is to define the relevant public as those affected, and to allow these individuals access (directly or indirectly) to consequential deliberation about the content of the decision at hand’ (Dryzek 2004).

Objectives of e-democracy projects using web-based questionnaires

I have been involved in a number of projects that have relied on the use of web-based questionnaires to engage citizens in dialogue with each other or with decision-making and policy-forming bodies. The main underlying ‘tool’ of the web-based questionnaire remained the same in all these projects, although the context of its use varied substantially. Key objectives of most of these projects have been to:

• build awareness about the potential that Information Technology (IT) has for involving citizens in collective decision-making processes and, more broadly, in deliberations that assist the formation of social values;
• build internal capacity and understanding about effective means of engaging citizens in consequential deliberation, through experimentation with IT tools,
• assist in making the strengthening and deepening of democracy a guiding principle of the development of an information society; and
• reinvigorate the debate about what Stephen Coleman calls ‘two incomplete historical projects: the Internet and democracy’, and their interrelationship.

Some of these projects have been very successful in: attracting citizen participation, i.e. high numbers of site visits and questionnaire completions; raising awareness about e-democracy; and potentially informing citizens about issues. They have also certainly been helpful in building internal capacity and understanding about the challenges of effective uses for deliberation enhancement (especially with regard to the specific tool of web-based questionnaires). It cannot be said, however, that citizen responses to questionnaires had been adequately linked to (or influenced) relevant decisions or policy formation.

World Summit for Sustainable Development, 2002

The first project I was involved in took place in conjunction with the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg in 2002. The Andreas Papandreou Foundation of Athens (www.agp.gr) and PoliticsOnline (www.PoliticsOnline.com) developed and conducted an in-depth online ‘poll’ or web questionnaire. In a period of one month preceding the WSSD, around 25,000 participants from 175 countries took part. The object was to have people express their opinions about current environmental conditions, to assess which environmental issues are most important and to evaluate possible solutions and policies.
This poll was the first online global poll of its type devoted to global political and public affairs issues relevant to the environment and sustainable development. Novel elements of the project were:

- global access to web questionnaire in seven languages;
- joint sponsorship by three of the largest media enterprises – the BBC, AOL-CNN Time Warner and MSN/Microsoft – ensuring the widest possible global distribution;
- a questionnaire was designed and focused exclusively on political and public affairs issues (non commercial);
- the results of the poll were scientifically presented so that all key indexes, such as respondents’ sex, age, region of the world, and so on, were recorded, reported and developed; and
- participants could immediately view cumulative results of the poll upon completion of their questionnaire.

Given the length of the questionnaire (it would take about 20 minutes to complete), the level of participation in a very short period was impressive. It’s success in that regard can be attributed to the heightened publicity and importance of the WSSD, the active support of major media companies and the sense that it was intimately linked to the official conference proceedings.

A complete archive of the site including reports, media coverage and raw data can be found at: [http://netpulseglobalpoll.politicsonline.com/technical.asp](http://netpulseglobalpoll.politicsonline.com/technical.asp) and a short paper presenting the project at: [www.jrc.es/home/report/english/articles/vol75/GOV9E756.htm](http://www.jrc.es/home/report/english/articles/vol75/GOV9E756.htm)

At a press conference at the WSSD, one of the reporters asked why we had not used the results of the poll to influence the conference proceedings. The question certainly goes to the heart of many deliberation experiments, and the answer cannot be any easy one. It has always been our intention to find ways of ensuring that citizen engagement has some kind of influence. We certainly want to avoid the use (or perception) of IT tools as merely a gimmick that gives a false sense of involvement in order to legitimize policies or decisions, or as a public relations stunt. In this sense, it is very important that any deliberative exercises do not generate false expectations concerning the extent to which they can have real influence. The more complex, indeed philosophical, issue is how one defines ‘real influence’ or ‘consequential deliberation’. In its broadest context, this is a question about the meaning and means of democracy. In the narrower context of our questionnaires, there are numerous forms of potential influence, such as to use the questionnaires to:

- set agendas for decision makers;
- improve the public’s understanding of issues at stake;
- take serious note of concerns, views and positions that citizens have; and
- as an indirect means of citizen deliberation over social values.

As far as the Online Global Poll was concerned, the answer to the reporter’s question as to why the questionnaire was not used to influence the conference proceedings is that we had not prepared well enough in advance to find a better means of integrating the online poll with the proceedings. Though it would have been much better to have a well-defined process of citizen input to the WSSD through the web, at the time we were inadequately prepared to achieve that.
objective. Nonetheless, we see the project as a success in generating awareness (an ‘influence’ in its own right) of e-democracy's potential, especially in the context of democracy in a globalizing world. Furthermore, in organizing the Global Online poll we educated ourselves and paved the way for new initiatives.

The European e-Vote Project

After getting a taste of what it means to prepare an online global poll, I became involved (in my capacity as member of the e-democracy committee at the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs) with the European e-Vote project that was launched as a part of the Greek Presidency of the EU. The following is a description of the project by Rachel Howard and Korina Pateli:¹

The initiative was anchored around a website (www.evote.eu2003.gr) that received unprecedented traffic (177,000 respondents). This e-Vote website made a dual contribution: it offered informative content on current European issues and the opportunity to participate in and voice opinion on policy decisions related to these issues. It did so through a clear visual language and information architecture designed to be accessible to all users, irrespective of their familiarity with the medium. In order to accommodate cultural diversity, the e-Votes and the content were available in all eleven official languages of the European Union, as well as of the ten future member states. The site's architecture provided one click-through access to information on EU basics and to background information to topical issues, so that citizens could be informed whilst expressing their opinion. The privacy of users was guaranteed throughout the e-Vote experience.

Through e-Vote, citizens were invited to respond to multiple choice questions on topical issues such as enlargement, immigration, the environment, and the European Union’s role in the world – issues that reflect the political and social priorities of the Greek Presidency’s agenda. All the results were public and available in real time. In addition, e-vote offered users the opportunity to voice their opinion in a free fashion by sending comments and suggestions to European leaders through the e-Voice feature, a service offered through an automated feedback form. Of the 60,000 e-Voices submitted, the seven most frequently asked questions were selected via word-usage ranking. Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Moller, Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel, and Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreou responded directly to these questions online.

The Greek Presidency contributed further to the e-vote process by sharing the results with top-level decision-makers. Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreou regularly reported on the key findings to the Council of Ministers, so that people’s views fed directly into ongoing policy debates. Rather than simply being told what Ministerial councils were discussing, the public was empowered to engage in these discussions. Moreover, the Presidency did not shy away from asking controversial and even politically sensitive questions, not usually voiced through ‘traditional’ channels of communication with government bodies and official institutions. Both these facts contributed significantly to the project’s success.

Once again, in terms of citizen participation, the e-Vote project was a major success. I think it was also successful as a means of better conveying the issues at stake at Ministerial Councils. I do not think the project had a real impact on decisions by European government officials. We did not expect it to have such an influence, but we did hope to pique politicians’ imagination about the potential use of IT for e-democracy purposes. The Greek Foreign Affairs Minister’s presentation of the results at the Ministerial Councils was a ‘soft’ form of having ‘voices’ heard.

The key reasons for the success of the e-Vote project were:

- high profile support by an authoritative body (Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs);

¹ See the short paper by Howard and Pateli presenting the project and some of the results can be found at www.ijclp.org/8_2004/ijclp_webdoc_12_8_2004.htm
active support by the European Union;
media sponsors as well as paid media promotion; and
good web and question design.

The European e-Vote experiment

A complete archive of the European eVote project can be found at www.evote.eu2003.gr

The project also gave rise to a potentially new deliberation tool we called eVoices. Once we had gathered the near 60,000 e-Voice questions submitted by citizens, we were confronted with the question of what to do with them. We devised a means of indexing questions by word frequency and then selected the ten ‘most frequent questions’ per theme. These were then put on the website and citizens were asked to vote for the questions they would like their politicians to answer. In a sense, we had devised a crude Google-type indexing mechanism that helped us discern patterns of questions raised by citizens. We now plan to further investigate the potential of using context-sensitive search engines to discover frequency patterns among citizen questions or responses. Imagine an online Global Press Conference where thousands of people have their ‘representative’ questions put to their political leaders!

Some limitations and strengths of web-based questionnaires

An important conceptual issue has to do with understanding the nature of these web questionnaires are. To the extent that they are open to the public and there is self selection in participation, they are certainly not scientific polls. Though this may appear as a disadvantage, it has numerous important advantages:

1. Self selection means that citizens themselves are keen on voicing their views and potentially having influence. The object is not to acquire a scientifically sound ‘snapshot’ of the possibly ‘passive’ citizens unexamined opinion, but to provide an avenue of active engagement by citizens interested in the matter at hand.

2. To an extent, appropriately designed questionnaires can be viewed as structured dialogue. When the number of individuals that need to be engaged in deliberation is very large, questionnaires can help structure their exchange of ideas. The use of open-form questions provides greater flexibility.

3. Well designed questionnaires can have an important educational impact both for the designers and the participants. The organizers have an interesting task in determining the right sort of questions, or the important questions, when engaging citizens about issues. Citizens can often acquire a much better understanding about ‘what is at stake’ through well designed questions, rather than full length documents. Indeed, there is also great value in having the citizens (or specific publics) themselves involved in designing the questions they would like themselves to answer.

4. The fact that one is not organizing a scientific opinion poll or some kind of legitimate voting process means that the results of the questionnaires are ‘less binding’ on decision makers. While this reduces the degree of influence engagement will have, it certainly
makes it easier for the organizers to undertake such exercises (with less fear that they will be bound by the outcome) and may enhance the deliberative and educative aspects while still maintaining some promise of indirect influence on decisions.

Obstacles and Difficulties

Given the scale of the projects undertaken to date, the main difficulties that can crop up in initiatives of this sort are:

1. adequate ‘legitimacy’ of the site in soliciting public involvement;
2. media coverage to create awareness of the deliberation exercise – this can be expensive if the organizers cannot find ways of generating the media pull or attracting their sponsorship, so it could useful to piggy-back on events that already attract media attention;
3. access to expertise in designing relevant questionnaires;
4. access to expertise in deliberative software;
5. to the extent that deliberation crosses national borders, good translations can be difficult to ensure;
6. to the extent that the deliberation feeds into policy formation or decision making, much more thought and time is required to design an appropriate deliberation process (including determining the appropriate publics, security, anonymity and other issues).

Launching of Access2Democracy

The success of the two projects discussed and the excitement that they generated among many of the individuals involved inspired the forming of an NGO called Access2Democracy (a2d), which is devoted to furthering the e-democracy objectives mentioned at the start of this paper. It is still very much in its early stages, having been officially launched at the 14th World Congress on Information Technology (WCIT) in Athens in May 2004. It has already embarked on a number of new projects and has plans for many more. Brief descriptions of some of the a2d projects can be found at the end of this paper. Among the more ambitious future projects being discussed is a web-based deliberation platform for engaging NGOs in the UN reform process concerning its relations to civil society.

Clearly, we have only really scratched the surface of deliberative initiatives. An important objective must be to find innovative ways of ensuring these experiments have readily observable impacts so that engaged citizens become cognizant of the way their voices are being heard. The web-based questionnaire (with varying degrees of interactivity) is only one of a growing variety of e-democracy tools. It can be used in many different ways and in varying contexts. We have already grown in our understanding of the fascinating issues entailed in the interplay between democracy and IT. We hope to greatly expand this understanding and spread its fruits with new tools and new experiments. We all need to apply our imaginations to partake in the improvement of that wonderful exercise in human development: the collective shaping of our social values.
1. eDialogue ([http://e-dialogos.pasok.gr](http://e-dialogos.pasok.gr))

'e-dialogos' is a micro-site within the PASOK (Greek Socialist Party) official website, launched during the 2004 elections in Greece. The site provides an opportunity for citizens to answer closed and open-form questions within a broad range of topics (e.g. education, society, politics). 12,000 unique visitors participated in the e-dialogue within five pre-election weeks.

2. eVoices Cyprus ([www.evoices.com.cy](http://www.evoices.com.cy))

A novel bi-communal project launched in the very sensitive political environment shortly before the plebiscite in April 2004 on the adoption of Kofi Annan’s Plan for Cyprus. The project was initiated by four NGOs to engage Cypriots in a series of issues. Anchored around a website initially accessible only by Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots, visitors could voice their opinions on specific issues by replying to web-based questions (closed and open form). The four NGOs are Access2Democracy for developing and technically supporting the web platform; the Turkish Istanbul Policy Center; the Greek-Cypriot Movement for Political Modernization; and the Turkish-Cypriot ‘KADEM’. It was supported by the Bi-communal Development Programme funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and executed by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS).

3. eVote at WCIT on partnership for e-democracy ([http://epartnerships.access2democracy.org/wcit](http://epartnerships.access2democracy.org/wcit))

This is a web-based questionnaire on ‘partnerships for e-democracy’, particularly between the public and the private sector, that aimed to survey views and opinions on e-democracy of participants at the 14th WCIT, and to provide a platform for creative deliberation within the third day’s discussions on ‘New directions in e-democracy/e-government’.
Key Issues and Policy Challenges for e-Democracy

Introduction

Cisco has been an interested and active participant in e-democracy policy and practice for at least the past five years. As you may expect given our international reach, our activities are geographically dispersed and reflect the general level of interest in e-democracy of each country. This geographical diversity is matched by a broad spectrum of activities in our e-democracy portfolio: spanning the provision of first round seed-funding for VoteHere through to our sponsorship of the visiting professorship of e-democracy at the Oxford Internet Institute. Sandwiched between the speculative and the contemplative are Cisco’s core business activities, namely the provision of networking technology. Such technologies have been deployed in all forms of e-democracy projects: voting, consultation, scrutiny, deliberation, and e-participation.

In the short space available in this paper, I will ground my comments on our UK experiences. Additionally, rather than detail how we have been involved, I will focus on addressing the issues and policy challenges that we believe need concerted action. The paper is structured as answers to the four questions posed for this symposium.

1. How have you managed to run successful e-democracy projects?

Our business model is such that we work via partners to deliver a business solution. Successful e-democracy projects display the usual characteristics of any successful project and these are well documented elsewhere [www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/](http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/) similarly the literature of project shortcomings is quite developed and the NAO/OGC Report on Common Causes of Project Failure provides a comprehensive list.¹

Our experiences of the e-democracy projects that worked well and of those that didn’t bear a very close match with the ingredients of success and failure identified above. If, as I claim, an e-democracy project is just another project then it raises an associated question about whether there are any particular characteristics that warrant more attention than usual. From our experience, there are two:

- stakeholder engagement and the stark focus on the citizen/participant;
- agreement of the specification and measurement of appropriate successful outcomes: the rather longer timescales needed to assess change and thus possible success make the drafting of key success criteria difficult.

I think that what this question highlights is that the e-democracy community has a somewhat elastic interpretation of success; the e-democracy community in general would benefit from a more relevant and rigorous yardstick of success or progress. Indeed, this question about success can be usefully couched in terms of public value and highlights the potential for mainstreaming the e-democracy debate into a broader-based public policy discussion.

2. What changes in democratic practices, processes or structures have these innovations enabled?

First of all let’s recognise that change occurs on vastly different timescales: technology changes occur near continuously, social changes occur on the order of a generation whilst the timeframe for changes in democratic institutions and practices appears almost geological. That said, there are grounds for hope.

Democratic institutions, voters and elected politicians are clearly at the centre of democratic practice; but I think that it is instructive to consider what other players there are in the ecosystem of democracy and to examine the extent to which they have embraced technology. By ecosystem, I mean a loose collection of stakeholders (such as journalists, the media, pollsters, think tanks, lobbyists, political parties, academics, community groups to name but a few) that participate in some shape or form in the democratic process. In each area it can be indisputably shown that these supporting actors in the democratic and civic processes are using new technology to good effect. It begs the question: If this is what the supporting players can do, how much more could the principal players be using the net?

3. What do you want to do next – and what’s stopping you?

Cisco’s roles in e-democracy can be grouped into four categories:
1. designer of new technology;
2. participant in e-democracy projects;
3. contributor to policy developments; and
4. sponsor of research.

We have a fair amount of autonomy over the first and last activities and so can confidently pursue them but the second and third activities are more collaborative and dependent upon the changing context of other e-democracy developments.

As regards category (2), we will continue to engage in e-voting projects but by far our greatest area of interest is to explore the links between e-participation and community. In outline we envisage the following strands of activity in the next year:
• participation and community;
• the role of the networked virtual community organization;
• participation and learning;
• e-participation in non-democratic societies; and
• e-democracy and public value: trust, confidence and legitimacy.

It is not clear what form our work with parliaments and parliamentarians will take but given the growing level of international interest we expect it to be significant.

Finally, and perhaps not surprisingly, we plan to develop an online communications programme comprising video-conferences, webcasts, webinars, videos-on-demand and online lectures. Despite the very encouraging stimulus that e-democracy appears to have received in 2003 there are still barriers to progress. Most policy innovations can be prey to the common bugs of political timidity, vested interest, territorialism, and factionalism and e-democracy is no exception.

Perhaps equally challenging are e-democracy’s perceived lack of relevance by some stakeholders and a failure to communicate effectively to all key stakeholders exactly what are
the key benefits of e-democracy. E-democracy needs to be part of, not apart from, mainstream policy developments; one of the lessons from the e-government programme shows that sustainable relevance comes from the tight coupling of the use of the Internet with key policy outcomes rather than from topical initiatives and capricious hand-outs from the Treasury and central departments.

4. How can policy-makers, technical experts or academic researchers contribute to the future success of e-democracy projects?

Before saying what each constituent can contribute, it may be useful to consider a few cross cutting suggestions as not only are there points of overlap there are also gaps in the totality of the constituents’ scope and the ambit of e-democracy.

A few areas where cross-cutting activities could contribute include:

- **Communications**: clearly articulate the role and benefits of e-democracy to a wide range of interested parties; find a means to keep all stakeholders appraised of technology developments; establish a common language and definitions; identify and use methodologies.

- **Creating a competitive and open e-democracy market**: keep bureaucracy to a minimum; provide an environment which encourages innovation and the entry of new players; provide appropriate pump priming; lay out clear medium/long-term plans and commitments.

- **Measurement**: build broad agreement on what constitutes a successful e-democracy outcome; link to a public-value framework.

- **Shared resources and sharing best practice**: create extensive online case studies; establish a directory of projects and activities; develop and use e-democracy shareware.

Understandably, this question is aimed at kind of a attendees at this symposium, but it is worth pointing out that there are others whose contribution will be key. I think that it would be useful if some thought was given to ways in which a diverse set of e-democracy ecosystem members could be encouraged to contribute on a regular basis.

Previously in the UK the National Forum for Internet and Democracy (NFID) sought to play such a role; it may be worth reconsidering the form and role of such a grouping and, indeed, its national/international scope. Regardless of whether such a successor to NFID is desirable or possible, I do think that there is an overriding priority to establish a means whereby links are established with local communities.

**Policy makers**

The challenge is to produce an e-democracy policy that has broad consensus, is extensive, relevant and achievable. The UK Cabinet Office has started to tackle this issue as well as anyone and their work provides a useful template upon which to build and comment.

E-Democracy is still embryonic and I think that it could gain substantially from integrating with other public policy developments; we have already mentioned the e-government agenda and the emerging public-value framework but there are other policy areas where closer policy integration could pay mutual dividends: perhaps the most pressing areas being local-community policy and social-inclusion policy. E-Democracy needs to be part of, not apart from, mainstream public policy developments.
Aside from not coupling e-democracy with community policy, it is probably fair to say that the extent to which freestanding e-democracy policy has reached into communities is marginal and certainly not very ambitious. We consider that one of the most promising long term benefits of e-democracy may come from e-participation in local communities. So the specific recommendation here is to extend and deepen the e-participation policy drafted thus far.

As well as e-democracy policy gaining from integrating with other policy areas it could also benefit from the lessons learnt in developing these policies; none more so than e-government. As a result of the profile and resources deployed on e-government programmes worldwide, there have been numerous studies and reports written on the subject.

Policy makers have a great responsibility to ensure that the environment exists for the development of a sustainable, competitive and open market for e-democracy products and services. Just as policy makers need to stimulate an environment to attract the interests of private sector and voluntary sector organizations it also needs to find the means to engage and retain the interest of politicians.

*Technical experts*

In the briefing paper for this symposium, we were quite rightly counselled against technological determinism; however, technology and the associated technical experts are pivotal components of e-democracy and its success. It may be helpful to consider such technical experts as comprising two groups: developers of technology and deliverers of technology. The first group helps provide the context, the second group the capacity for e-democracy. Innovations that will drive real change will come from the first group; confidence and legitimacy flow from the building and delivery of a credible e-democracy capability.

Drilling down one more level we can say that in the first category are developers of general technology (hardware and software) and developers of specific e-democracy applications. Innovations in the former will happen regardless of what happens in the area of e-democracy; innovations in the latter will be determined almost solely by the prevailing e-democracy environment. Aside from freeware and open source initiatives, the creativity and vibrancy of the e-democracy market will conform to the usual free market rules and economics. Simply put, the level of innovation, quality and output will be in accordance with the opportunity for reward.

The e-democracy applications market is nascent. It is not a complex task to develop a broad range of e-democracy software; however, it is difficult to speculate with any confidence that the business models to support this will be feasible. In contrast, I think that we can speculate with much greater confidence as regards general technology developments and these will be the innovations that can drive real change. In particular the steadily increasing momentum behind the roll out of high speed broadband should not be underestimated.

Similarly, the recent explosive growth and widespread deployment of wireless (802.11 and derivatives) with the attendant mobility advantages can be expected to continue at least in the near term. The corporate turmoil and battles in the voice and data industries are slowly being resolved as Voice-over-Internet-Protocol (VoIP) is now a commercial reality. All of these indicate the triumph of the Internet Protocol (IP). We have recently seen robust commercial offerings in the collaboration software market, e-learning and IP video-conferencing. In the not too distant future we can expect to see the final step towards genuine convergence of data, voice and video in the mass market. Then the possibilities will be immense.
Academics

A respected, proud and confident academic community will be a key determinant of the success of the e-democracy venture. Sections of the academic community have a good appreciation of the next steps on the e-democracy journey; the ongoing provision of sustained, independent and authoritative research and commentary are sought. It will be important that the open, regular and constructive interchange between academics and other stakeholders continues. As the size of the e-democracy academic community continues to grow it must resist the natural temptation just to talk ever more to like-minded individuals but should strive to find a mode and manner of language that is clear and accessible to all.
Janet Seaton, Head of Research and Information Services, Scottish Parliament

The Scottish Parliament: Developing e-Democracy

Early successes

The first elections to the Scottish Parliament took place on 1 May 1999. The founding principles of the Parliament stress accountability, openness, accessibility, power sharing and equal opportunities. Its commitment to these principles is expressed in its management plan. One of its four strategic priorities for the period 2004–2007 is to ‘Inform and engage the public and other key stakeholders by: Increasing awareness and understanding of the Parliament; Providing opportunity for participation in parliamentary business and activities; Maximising the benefits of the new building’.

The Parliament has always seen the Internet as one of the major mechanisms for engaging Scottish citizens in the Parliament’s business and activities. We have two websites, which we are currently redesigning.¹ Our most successful initiatives have been: the e-petitioning system (on the main website); webcasting of proceedings; and the discussion forums, which are on the scottishparliamentlive.com site.

The e-petitioning system, which was recently re-launched, allows people to submit, sign, discuss and track petitions online. Our opening ceremony, on 1 July 1999, was broadcast live over the Internet, and since September 2000 so have all plenary proceedings. The discussion forums allow citizens to contribute to a debate connected to a Members’ business debate in the Chamber or to evidence being gathered by a Committee in the course of an inquiry.

Obstacles to Success

Voter disinterest

Increasing disinterest in the political process in general makes voter engagement a real challenge. We are building on interest in our web pages for each Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) by involving them in new presentation methods on our website, including videos. We are also looking hard at all our methods of public information (leaflets, advertising etc), as uninformed citizens will not want to, or know how to, engage.

Infrastructure and home PC use

Research has told us that 76 percent of our users access our websites at their place of work and that 74 percent of our users use them for the purposes of their work. We facilitate and encourage a network of partner public libraries to provide free online access to the Parliament’s websites, but until recently this was not fully operational in all parts of Scotland. We aim to build on this by engaging ‘partners’ in community groups etc, which tend to have online access centres.

¹ See http://www.scottish.parliament.uk; http://www.scottishparliamentlive.com
Firewalls

The majority of organisations do not grant access to streaming media because they have no business reason to do so, or the business case to put in the necessary equipment to manage the traffic is not sufficiently strong. There are very few Internet streaming media sites to which businesses require access and, on the whole, where access is required the specific site is opened up. One of the other drivers for denying access to streaming media is that it is difficult to virus check the data in real time without a considerable investment in equipment, or acceptance of the risks associated with not virus checking.

As a result many of our key stakeholders, including local councils, companies, and quangos – even the Scottish Executive – prevent access to scottishparliamentlive.com, despite having good PCs and high-speed Internet access. Ironically, people who buy a standard PC using even just a dial up connection from home, have no such difficulties with access. So sometimes a council leader, for example, can have poorer level of access to the Parliament’s interactive services in his main office than his 10 year old son has in his room.

Lack of promotion

Despite these innovative initiatives many Scots do not know about them. More effort needs to be made to make them aware of them and their ability to participate through them. Even some MSPs still don’t know we webcast all our proceedings. In terms of our interactive forums we are still, for example, meeting nursery nurses who don’t know about our Nursery Nurse Dispute forum despite it having been in existence since October, and Nursery Nurses having been on all-out strike since March. To use the analogy above, we should be targeting the council leader so that they influence their organisation’s policies.

Overcoming barriers

Sharing best practice

High profile organisations can be risk-averse, so spreading awareness of what works and encouraging by example is a powerful incentive to develop new initiatives.

Curriculum development

We feel that there should be great potential for engaging a younger audience with the Parliament through schools, but to date it has been difficult to make the connection between pupils’ use of IT in schools and content about democratic citizenship. We are seeking opportunities to improve this in future if citizenship becomes a more important element of the curriculum. We are also introducing new ‘youth’ pages as part of our web redesign.

Engaging with politicians

Demonstrating the efficiency of e-democracy in raising politicians’ profiles, either individually or collectively, would encourage greater use of e-democracy tools to re-engage voters with their elected representatives.
Making it meaningful

People will want to participate if they understand how they can contribute to the political process, and believe that their contribution will be taken seriously. Elected representatives and democratic institutions can contribute by employing e-democracy initiatives only where participation is meaningful, and can be shown to be so.
Cheryl Stewart, Director of Parliamentary Affairs, Office of the Minister of State for Public Health, Government of Canada

The Internet and e-Democracy: An Opportunity to Create a Space for Engagement between Parliament and Citizens

Introduction

Canadians, not unlike those in other countries, have been involved in policy and decision making to varying degrees – mostly becoming actively engaged around specific issues that matter to them most, such as health care and education.

As seen in other Western democracies, there has been a fundamental shift in Canada away from proactive and ongoing engagement during and between elections. Our voter turnouts have been declining and polls have repeatedly shown that citizens feel disillusioned by politics in general. They have developed mistrust in partisan political processes and often claim that government is disengaged from community realities, choosing to govern from the centre down rather than from the grassroots up. As University of Toronto Professor Neil Nevitte wrote: there has clearly been a ‘decline of deference’.

One of the cornerstones of democracy has been to provide public spaces to allow for ongoing two-way interchange between citizens and their elected representatives. While governments have become more detached, citizens still look for these spaces to get information and to engage. There are clear signs that citizens have strong opinions about issues – especially ones that affect their lives directly. They are participating actively with each other and other parts of society (such as Non Governmental Organizations) through their communities, the Internet and other media.

The reality is that these spaces will exist whether or not governments create them or belong to them. If governments want to reconnect with citizens we need to tap into these tools – providing opportunities for mutually beneficial engagement – ultimately ensuring accurate, accountable and transparent decision making and representation.

We believe that the Internet and e-democracy present one such way to positively redefine democratic processes and reinvigorate the relationship between citizens and their elected representatives.

Dr. Carolyn Bennett, Minister of State for Public Health and a Member of Canadian Parliament since 1997, is considered a Champion in the area of democratic reform in Canada. As an MP she has been very committed to building a new synergy between citizens and the Government by creating democracy between elections.

Now as a new Cabinet Minister who has the considerable task of developing options for a new Public Health Agency for Canada, Minister Bennett remains committed to creating the spaces and assured listening she feels are necessary to develop and maintain a rapport with citizens. Her work as a Minister has allowed her to complement ongoing efforts to engage constituents as a Member of Parliament. The following are a few web specific tools that she has found most useful.
The Canadian Pension Plan online consultation with Canadians

As a Member of Parliament, Minister Bennett acted as the Chair of the multi-party Sub-Committee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities from 1998-2002. As part of its work, the Committee developed The Canadian Pension Plan Online Consultation with Canadians (www.parl.gc.ca/disability). This extremely successful initiative represented the first interactive website for a Parliamentary Committee in Canada.

The project, which sought specifically to inform citizens and get their views on the Canadian Pension Plan Disability Program, was designed with the intent to engage society as active members of the Committee’s work. The content-driven website provided, among other things, a list of upcoming events, transcripts of meetings, Committee reports to Parliament, Government responses to the reports, presentations and briefs presented to the Committee, a work plan, a list of committee members and a history of the Committee’s work.

As a consultation mechanism, the website had three specific interactive tools for citizens. Issue polls were used to seek input on specific themes. The site also allowed citizens to share their own stories and experiences in dealing with government processes and provided them with an opportunity to share solutions.

In order to ensure the consultations were transparent, the Committee created a feedback loop to citizens by posting results of the issues polls as well as some of the individual stories and experiences shared by Canadians who visited the site.

The results were significant. During the consultation period alone there were almost 170,000 page requests on the website, almost 1500 people participated in the issue poll, 135 stories were submitted and almost 30 people took the time to suggest solutions. When asked about their experience in post-consultation follow up, over 90 percent of participants said they would participate again.

Those people involved in developing and implementing this initiative believe it was successful because it engaged citizens as partners in the decision making process. The Committee’s strategy blended the traditional forms of committee consultation (hearings) with an integral e-consultation component. In addition to this, after the consultation participants were asked to attend a national roundtable with officials to vet the draft report – adding increased legitimacy to the Report’s outcomes and recommendations.

Other key factors for success included ongoing and active political support, interaction between all relevant partners was initiated at the outset, adequate time was allocated for planning and development, appropriate first steps were taken (information-based site, research), proper tools were utilized, and effective communications and analysis strategies were developed and implemented.

Member of Parliament website for St. Paul’s

As part of her larger model to engage constituents in her riding of St. Paul’s (which includes things such as Newsletters, Parliamentary clinics, opinion polls, roundtables and town hall meetings) Minister Bennett hosts a website (www.carolynbennett.ca) which is kept current and up to date. The site includes an ongoing personal log of her work as a Parliamentarian (including her views on hot issues), important dates and events in her constituency and across
the country, dates for her upcoming town hall events, and links to other information and issues that citizens may find useful.

There is also a link for citizens to provide feedback and information on how to contact the Minister (she personally responds to every e-mail sent through the site). As a Parliamentarian, Dr. Bennett has found this tool to be of great assistance in staying connected with her constituents. Since becoming a Cabinet Minister and travelling substantially to consult with Canadians on the new Public Health Agency, this website has proven even more invaluable – as it provides a great venue for her to share her work and experiences and interact with constituents while she is away.

**New public health website**

As mentioned above, Minister Bennett has spent the last few months visiting every region of Canada to consult with stakeholders and citizens on three major issues: the creation of the new Public Health Agency, selection of a the first Chief Public Health Officer for Canada and a new Pan-Canadian public health network. As part of the consultation process, Minster Bennett’s team has worked with Health Canada Officials to develop a website on public health issues ([www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/pha/index.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/pha/index.html)). The site provides information on the Minister’s consultations, a background paper explaining the rationale for a public health agency, other related papers to frame discussions, and links to larger public health issues, as well as questions and a link for citizens to provide input on what they feel should be included in the new agency.

In the set of discussion questions, Minister Bennett seeks input on two very specific issues related to citizen engagement. She asks how the new public health agency can remain accountable and transparent to citizens and how citizens can directly shape the objectives of the agency from one year to the next.

Although the site is in preliminary stages, we have had some very positive feedback on our outreach in this phase of the consultations and we plan to further enhance the features of the site as our work progresses.

**Embedding citizens in the DNA of the new Public Health Agency**

Given that public health issues affect Canadians in their homes and communities on a daily basis, we believe that the Government and the Chief Public Health Officer, through the new Agency, have a wonderful opportunity to continue the meaningful, proactive citizen engagement that began with the exemplary consultation process of the Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care. As we wrap up Phase One of our consultations, Minister Bennett’s team is now beginning to think through some of the ways we can ensure that the Agency is citizen-centered and that citizen engagement is embedded in the very DNA of its operations. We envision an institution that is founded upon recognition of the value of citizens contributing in an on-going and meaningful way. This philosophy will, in turn, ensure that the Agency is effective, real and transparent – thus ensuring the ultimate goal of Canadians being among the world’s healthiest.

In addition to examining the role citizens can play in *ad hoc* committees and yearly evaluations of the Agency, we have recently formed an Advisory Committee consisting of democratic reform champions to specifically examine citizen and stakeholder engagement. We are now in the process of developing a paper that will outline some of the most innovative work being done in Canada and internationally to engage citizens. Although many of the projects will not
necessarily be developed by government for government, we will be examining the initiatives within a public health context and will recommend ways these tools and processes may be adjusted to fit the needs of the new Public Health Agency. We feel this work will be very informative and useful to the new Chief Public Health Officer, as he/she will ultimately be tasked with ensuring that citizens are the centre of the new Agency.

Concluding remarks

In this short paper, we have attempted to provide fellow conference attendees with a snapshot of some of the citizen engagement initiatives Minister Bennett has undertaken as a Parliamentarian. She is of the mind that, in order for efforts to be useful, interaction and engagement with citizens must be first and foremost meaningful and must seek to decrease the cynicism surrounding elected representatives – avoiding the ‘proforma’ occupational therapy of perfunctory consultation that wastes their time.

Canada, under the direction of the new Prime Minister Paul Martin, is undergoing some significant change in other areas of democratic reform. As a first step, Mr. Martin has instituted some parliamentary reform efforts (www.pm.gc.ca/eng/dem_reform.asp) and Minister Bennett recently co-authored a paper entitled, The Parliament We Want: Parliamentarians Views on Parliamentary Reform.¹ Although change will be incremental and will require a shift in culture, we hope this is the beginning of some positive progress in the functioning of Canadian democracy.

Undoubtedly, many challenges remain for those of us who are interested in this relatively new and developing field of e-democracy as we try to find ways to utilize these tools in a way that is both productive and consequential. However, we believe that the work done by Dr. Coleman and others shows significant promise and is ultimately building strong foundations for a new way of interacting with communities and citizens.

On behalf of Minister Bennett and the team that works closely with her on these issues, I am extremely pleased to be attending this symposium to share with you our experiences in Parliament and I am equally excited to learn other best practices and to work with all of you to define a way forward for e-democracy.

¹ See www.parl.gc.ca/information/library/views/parliamentviews-e.htm
Paul Timmers, Head of Unit eGovernment, European Commission, DG-Information Society

Agenda for eDemocracy: an EU perspective

Introduction

The European Commission has taken up eDemocracy as part of the ‘eCommission’ (the modernisation of internal administration and improved communication, within particular Member States and other European institutions, and better public services to citizens and business) and as an integral element of its Better Regulation approach. Activities that directly concern citizens include online availability of all legislation and other official Commission documents, and the introduction of Interactive Policy Making for input to policy-making (spontaneous feedback and online consultation).

An example of achieving a more direct impact, enabled by ICT, of businesses on legislation was the consultation process in 2003 on new legislation for chemicals. An Internet-enabled consultation was held over some two months, during which 6500 contributions were received via the Interactive Policy Making web tool. All responses were published on a Commission website for full transparency to show which organisation, company or individual had advocated which amendments. Thanks to the consultation, it was discovered that the legislation did have a flaw: one that would have increased costs by several billions of Euros, in particular for smaller companies.

European Commissioner Erkki Liikanen compared this way of open consultation over the Internet of a draft law with open-source software development. The open-source community is based on open online critical scrutiny and dialogue to find flaws in a piece of software (‘bugs’). By analogy, the chemicals legislation has been debugged. For the Commission services involved, it was a hard task to analyse the many contributions. The sheer volume, variety of opinions and time constraints were a real challenge and resulted in some first-hand experience with the challenges of openness, transparency, personalisation, inclusion and efficiency.

At EU level, ‘YourVoice in Europe’ offers a single access point in all official languages for Commission public consultation (see http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice). This is further enhanced by improved access to information about the European institutions through Europa 2nd Generation, a new generation of portals for a complete range of thematic information and interactive services on EU policies and activities, which hides the organisational complexity behind the scenes.

The EU Presidencies have also become interested in making use of eDemocracy tools. An example is the eVote website (http://evote.eu2003.gr/EVOTE/en/index.stm), which was run during the Greek Presidency of the Council in the first half of 2003 to achieve broad online consultations (see position paper by Andreas Papandreou above, pages 70–5).

1 Opinions expressed here are the author’s and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the European Commission. I am grateful for contributions to this paper by Gareth MacNaughton of the European Commission, DG-Information Society.


eGovernment principles and policy in the EU

eDemocracy is seen as an integral part of the eGovernment policy as formulated by the European Commission (2003) and supported by the Council of Ministers (see Council Conclusions of 20 November 2003, http://europa.eu.int/egovernment). This policy emphasises that eGovernment is a means to enable better government, i.e. better governance in the sense of:

1. openness and transparency: governments that are understandable and accountable to their citizens, and open to democratic involvement and scrutiny;
2. at the service of all: inclusive and personalised services;
3. productivity and efficiency: delivering maximum value for taxpayers’ money.

Nevertheless, at the time of writing, no explicit eDemocracy policy has been formulated, beyond good governance principles (that are also applicable to the European Institutions themselves), as formulated in the 2001 White Paper on European Governance (European Commission 2001); the general policy for eGovernment; the use of online consultation as part of Better Regulation; and support for eDemocracy research and development in the EU’s Information Society Technologies Programme, including piloting or implementation where applicable in the related eTEN and IDA programmes. In contrast, the part of eGovernment that is about using ICT, organisational innovation and improvement of skills to deliver more efficiently and with better quality administrative services is rich in specific policy targets and related actions.

There is certainly a question of mandate at European level: democratic participation, elections, etc. are in the realm of Member States. Proposals for contributions at European level need to be critically reviewed as to their legal basis, usefulness and justification in accordance with a respect of subsidiarity. For example, the Commission sets out to apply good governance principles by making its own provision of services more transparent and by improving democratic participation in its policy preparation. It can also address essential conditions for eDemocracy through: EU-supported R&D and pilot deployment and implementation projects that deliver common secure platforms; removing barriers that are also impediments to the Internal Market (for example, recognition of electronic signatures, re-use of public sector information); and by advancing European Citizenship.

There is also the ‘quo vadis’ question: there is a need at this moment in time to take stock, and reflect on, the next steps (as was done at the OII Seminar for which this paper was prepared). In February 2004, the Commission organised a seminar on eDemocracy that set out to bring together experiences and investigate needs for more advanced work in eDemocracy. The emphasis was less on policy development than on exchanging practical experiences, confronting lessons learned and determining options for future R&D in EU programmes. Both eVoting and eParticipation were addressed, and results from the experiences of a number of EU-supported projects (e.g. Webocracy, E-Poll) were presented. Good practice experiences in eDemocracy are also available from the eEurope eGovernment Awards and other sources.

Key issues in eVoting and eParticipation

In the area of eVoting, much activity has clearly been happening over recent years. Remarkably, opposite views were tabled regarding practical experiences and acceptance, from widespread and successful adoption of Internet voting (e.g. in Geneva elections) to profound scepticism. Many technological issues have already been researched and perhaps the pressure

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4 See the eGovernment Good Practice Framework at http://europa.eu.int/egovernment_research/gpf.
for continued technological research has abated, while there is still a great need to obtain better understanding of social and cultural factors in eVoting. The main issues identified in eVoting in terms of benefits, technology and design (of solutions) are listed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Issues in eVoting**

| Benefits | • Multi-channel access/digital divide – costs and benefits.  
|          | • Increase turnout and legitimacy.  
|          | • Advanced R&D underway or completed. |
| Technology | • Verifiability of IT-systems adopted.  
|           | • Security and privacy provisions.  
|           | • Open or closed source.  
|           | • Intuitive multi-modal user interfaces.  
|           | • Mission critical/disaster recovery/failure tolerant back-end systems. |
| Design   | • Variations in participation situations.  
|          | • Main basic principles for voting via ICT.  
|          | • Federated systems.  
|          | • ICT modelling of legal processes.  
|          | • Role of third party providers.  
|          | • Standards. |

eParticipation was seen as a rich area for future exploration, where positive experiences and concrete gains have already been made in improving the quality of decision-making. The area is wide open in terms of both technology and non-technology research. The main issues in eParticipation identified at the seminar are listed in Table 2 below.

**Table 2. Issues in eParticipation**

| Benefits | • In-house benefits versus users/citizens.  
|          | • Positive versus hazards.  
|          | • Elite/incremental versus divide.  
|          | • Traditional policy cycle for decisions versus online consultations/debate.  
|          | • Instant evaluation versus ongoing, longitudinal assessment.  
|          | • Aiming for success or experiments. |
| Technology | • Adopted IT systems not suited/designed for mass participation.  
|           | • Trust and transparency, including software aspects.  
|           | • Logging and back-up issues.  
|           | • Scale and innovation in-house and outside. |
| Design   | • Variations in participation situations.  
|          | • Closed, structured flow versus open, unstructured.  
|          | • Text, voice recognition, visualisation.  
|          | • Log files of activities and problems.  
|          | • Transfer of techniques from the off-line participation sphere (e.g. dispute resolution). |
The potential of further R&D in eParticipation was also explored during a recent R&D workprogramme planning workshop.\(^5\) Priorities that were defined included ‘bottom-up’ eDemocracy (starting from citizens initiatives) and new technologies for eDemocracy such as simulation software, information representation and visualisation, and collaboration technologies.

One main issue in this respect remains trust. There needs to be research to understand the public’s willingness to develop a remote trusted relationship with government. For example, as regards electronic identification, perhaps governments could consider accepting multiple secure identities that suit the general public.

At the eDemocracy seminar of February 2004, former Estonian Prime Minister Mart Laar suggested the defining of targets at European level, for example to use eParticipation to achieve increased interest and participation in the run-up to the European elections of 2009. There is definitely a need for further reflection and suggestions for shared initiatives and target-setting at European level to give an impetus to the best use of ICT-driven innovation for improved democratic decision-making and participation.

References


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Rebecca Vigi-Giron, Secretary of State, State of New Mexico

New Mexico’s e-Democracy Initiatives

Background

In 1987, New Mexico began its process of uniformity for the compilation of voters statewide with the passage of the Automated Voter Registration System (AVRS). There are currently 33 counties statewide and each county was required to download their voter registration updates to the office of the Secretary of State on a monthly basis and then weekly closer to the close of voter registration prior to an election. This new system when merged in the office of the Secretary of State has the capabilities of identifying duplicate voters with similar social security numbers, the identifying number used for that voter. Once duplicates were discovered, a notice was sent to county clerks to remove the older voter registration and thus clean their records. This was done over a number of days and weeks.

In 1999, the office of the Secretary of State began the process of securing a vendor who could build a voter data system that would have faster capabilities than the current AVRS. One was selected by a committee made up of County Clerks, Data Processing personnel and a representative from the office of the Secretary of State. In 2000, during the legislative session, my office was appropriated $600,000 to begin the project.

From 2000 until 2002 we proceeded in building the state’s Voter Registration and Election Management System (VREMS). The State Legislature supported this project with an additional $1.8 million dollars and, during the completion of VREMS, the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) was signed into law by the President in October 2002. One particular mandate of HAVA was that all states would build and implement a centralized voter data system that would be an online real-time system by 2004.

New Mexico had been building and getting all the counties involved with this voluntary system. It now became a federal mandate that was nearing completion but we did not originally plan on a real-time system. We went back to our vendor and requested an amendment to the original contract making a major adjustment to the project. Not only was this a major adjustment but also would require additional dollars and additional training for the elections officials in the counties. HAVA is one of those federal mandates that is funded and is allowing us to use $4.0 million dollars that was appropriated to New Mexico. We are at the end of our project, which will be completed by August 2004.

Implementation and functionality

My office convinced the legislature early on that it was crucial that the Voter Data technology within the office of the Secretary of State, Chief Elections Officer for the state if New Mexico, needed to be improved. We have a new statewide voter registration system that is compliant with the Help America Vote Act. A few technical details of this system are:

1. Oracle 9i Database containing all voter registration records for the state.
2. The server farm is located in Santa Fe, the State capitol.
3. 33 New Mexico Counties access the application over various Internet connections using a Citrix client.
4. We use SSL and Citrix encryption.
Having a statewide Internet voter registration system has enabled the following functionality that was not available before:

1. When a voter moves from County A to County B, County B can move the voters record from County A to County B. This eliminated duplicate voter registrations and saves County staff resources required to eliminate duplicate registration using the mail. County A is notified by e-mail that County B transferred their voter.
2. We now have a statewide ‘deceased’ file using data from the Vital Records department. This helps us remove deceased individuals in a timely manner.
3. We now have a statewide felony file. Prior to this, an individual with a felony conviction could easily move to a new county and illegally register to vote.
4. We will soon begin using data from the Motor Vehicle Division to clean up data in the voter file.

Overcoming obstacles

Implementing a sound technical solution was only half the battle. The other half was convincing the 33 County Clerks that going in this direction of change would make their jobs easier and more efficient.

Some of the obstacles that we faced were infrastructure as well as emotional. New Mexico is the fifth largest state geographically with 1.8 million in population and approximately 1.0 million registered voters. We addressed the infrastructure issues with our federal dollars and we improved the clerk’s offices by purchasing all of their equipment necessary for VREMS implementation. We addressed the more emotional issues such as change within those clerks’ offices by creating user groups, which included clerks and their data processing personnel. In the user group meetings, attendees could address issues such as hardware, software, training and vendor support in order to solve individual needs and concerns.

By far the biggest obstacle has been getting cooperation from all 33 counties. This initiative has meant change and the loss of some degree of control for the counties. But county cooperation was increased by the federal HAVA mandate that all states develop such a system and that it is funded.

Additional benefits from the system

Election-night reporting

One outcome of the Voter Registration project is that all New Mexico counties now have broadband Internet access and e-mail. We plan to implement an election night reporting package where counties can login, and update election night returns as they come in. Returns will immediately available to the public in one central location.

Campaign reports

In New Mexico, Candidates, and Political Committees file reports of campaign contributions and spending. We asked the legislature for funds, for many years, to buy an electronic campaign reporting system. The big obstacle to this project has been cost. The market leader gave us an estimate of $700,000 for New Mexico. The legislature was not interested in spending this amount of money. Uniform, nation-wide campaign laws would allow vendors to develop one system to sell to all states, rather than having to customize systems for each state. This would bring down the cost of these systems dramatically.
Last year, Office Automation Solutions, a software development company, agreed to deliver a system to us for $120,000. The legislature found the money and the system is currently being developed. The primary advantage of this system is that the public and the press will be able to search the database of campaign contributions and expenses to follow the money trail. This will be a big improvement over the old system, paging through paper reports or scanned images of reports. The system will also make our office more efficient and eliminate the stacks and stacks of paper reports we have received in the past.

Another obstacle to Campaign Reporting is reluctance by candidates and committees to using an Internet application. One reason for this reluctance is that their activity will be more accessible to the public, press and rivals. The New Mexico Legislature remedied this problem in 2003 by mandating that all candidates and committees file electronically beginning in 2006.
Martin Vogel, Project Leader, BBC iCan

Supporting Participation in Democracy and Civic Life

What is iCan?

BBC iCan ([www.bbc.co.uk/ican/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ican/)) is an interactive service designed to help people participate in democracy and civic life. It operates as a website with support from radio and television programmes and BBC News Online. It serves three main purposes:

- **Information provision by the BBC**: authoritative guides to civic life, a database of organisations, classified by issue, and information on all elected representatives.

- **Information sharing by users**: articles, guides and advice contributed by iCan users.

- **Campaigning tools**: helping users get together to address issues of concern and to gain support.

iCan grew out of a review of the BBC’s political coverage following the last General Election, when turnout fell to a record low. It is aimed at people who are dissatisfied with mainstream politics but nonetheless care about issues which affect their lives. iCan seeks to address two obstacles which people say prevent them from trying to influence over such issues:

- **I don’t know where to start**: iCan offers leads on approximately two thousand issues in civic life.

- **I can’t make a difference on my own**: iCan enables people to link up with others who share their concern.

iCan launched in pilot form in November 2003. Alongside the website, the BBC conducted broadcast trials in five areas of the UK: Sheffield, Cambridge, Leicester, Bristol and Wales. The broadcast trials gave contextually relevant promotion of iCan (i.e. when covering stories about grassroots issues) and also, as the site developed, drew on iCan as a source of stories and contacts for news programmes.

In the four months to the end of March 2004, the iCan audience grew to 100,000 unique users per month, with 6,500 registered users – i.e. users who contribute to the site. More than 500 campaigns were created. iCan is being used for the purpose for which it was designed – as a forum for addressing issues in civic life. The quality of contributions is high – well-constructed articles and comments, with no significant flaming (abusive and inflammatory contributions). Users are addressing local concerns and national issues in equal numbers. There is some anecdotal evidence that at least some of the users are people who were not previously involved in civic issues.

iCan is now entering a new phase, where it will be promoted across the UK. We are also beginning a redesign of the site to make it much easier to use.

Case studies of how people are using iCan are presented in the Appendix to this paper.

Lessons learned

We were keen from the outset to create a new kind of deliberative space – in which people would engage with each other constructively to understand and resolve issues. A number of factors have contributed to fostering a seriousness of engagement by users:
• **Slow community**: iCan is designed to elicit a slower, more deliberative form of participation than other forms of online community. There is no discussion forum as such. Users are invited to submit articles, comment on articles, and: if campaigning – maintain a campaign diary.

• **Accountability**: Users are asked to contribute using their real name – first name and surname. They also participate by signing-in to an account that they use across the BBC website. These two factors combine to give people an investment in their reputation in the iCan community and so help to minimise deliberately provocative or abusive contributions.

• **Hybrid community**: iCan brings together BBC-authored and user-generated content in a single, cohesive proposition. The BBC content helps to model the kind of content that we want to encourage in iCan.

• **Variety of ways to interact**: There are opportunities to contribute requiring varying levels of effort – including one-click forms of participation such as voting. This means that users who want simply to register their view on an issue can do so without having write a comment which may have little intrinsic value as content.

• **Expose opposition**: iCan seeks to juxtapose contrasting perspectives on an issue, so that users are forced to engage with their opposition. This can help them either to improve their arguments, or even to broaden their case to turn opponents into allies.

• **Reactive moderation**: All content is published and will stay published as long as users keep within simple house rules. We moderate on the basis of complaints received, so the community itself shares responsibility for maintaining standards.

Other lessons learned included:

• **Importance of broadcast support**: The use of broadcast programmes to raise awareness of iCan has been critical in encouraging usage among people who might not otherwise have thought of using the Internet to address civic issues. During the pilot period, even though the site was available nationally, we saw a clear bias in usage towards the five areas where BBC programmes were referring to iCan.

• **Can’t make it too simple**: Civic life is confusing and difficult to model online. We are not happy that we entirely succeeded in this regard. People are finding value in iCan despite the fact that it is challenging to use. Simplifying as much as possible is likely to foster a greater volume of usage.

**Why it worked well**

It is probably too early to draw conclusions but here are some indicative judgements:

• **Democratic culture**: iCan was designed to provide value in the specific conditions which prevail in the UK. The model is possibly not transferable wholesale to other contexts, although the approach we took to its development might be. This became apparent to us when we were asked to help with the development of an iCan for Serbia – where faith in the democracy has yet to be established. Although iCan is a response to an increasing sense of alienation from politics in the UK, it does tap into a generally shared belief in the fundamental validity of our democracy and an appetite to make it work.

• **Changing citizenship**: Related to the above point, iCan taps in to a more assertive form of citizenship that is emerging. This was highlighted in the research for the BBC’s review of its political coverage, Beyond the Soundbite ([www.trbi.co.uk/trbipolitics.pdf](http://www.trbi.co.uk/trbipolitics.pdf)). People take an increasingly consumerist orientation to decision-makers and elected representatives – expecting accountability and redress. In addition, many have a broader view of the issues that are contestable in the public domain than do many
politicians. iCan has won respect from young users who are traditionally suspicious of conventional media. The like the fact that it provides a platform for issues and forms of politics that are not normally visible in mainstream media.

- **Independent facilitator**: iCan is designed in keeping with the BBC’s values of independence and impartiality. It is hard to imagine any government institution successfully providing a similar platform for participation and campaigning, as it is unlikely to be trusted to manage the service disinterestedly. The impartiality of iCan is also important, in that it fosters a greater sense of realism than ideologically driven initiatives. iCan provides a level-playing field on which anyone can play, regardless of their affiliation or agenda. So users are forced to encounter contradictory perspectives. Contrast this with, for example, the Dean campaign in the US – where like-minded people talked only to each other online, gaining an exaggerated sense of their real world potential.

- **Support of the BBC**: There are risks for the BBC in offering a service such as iCan, not least in terms of the political heat it could generate for the organisation when campaigning activities in iCan begin to affect powerful interests. But the BBC is well placed to offer the support and resources over the long term that iCan needs in order to flourish. The BBC understands the risks but is undertaking the project for clear public service reasons. If iCan is successful, in five years it will be the first point of call for people wanting to address issues that concern them – and will be having a discernible impact in helping them achieve outcomes.

**Policies/research suggestions**

**Policies**

Who should provide deliberative/participatory online spaces? Independent intermediaries are preferable to official channels. Government should support the development of deliberative and participatory spaces by:

- providing honest, unspun information in syndicatable form – to which intermediaries can add value;
- participating in such communities themselves; and
- being responsive to civic efforts spawned through such projects.

**Research**

What is the real demand for deliberative/participatory online spaces? iCan is a response to an expressed reluctance to get involved because of the difficulties of participation. I wonder to what extent people are being honest with us and with themselves when they say this to researchers? Is there a deeper disengagement at work, whereby people no longer look to the public realm to resolve their problems?
APPENDIX: ICAN CASE STUDIES

Campaign

This is an example of an iCan campaign. As far as we know, the user is young and chanced upon iCan. I like the campaign because it is not a stereotypical civic issue, but clearly something that is close to the user's heart. The user has intuitively grasped various aspects of the campaign functionality and that it is a focus:

- Clear statement of his objectives under 'What We Want' and 'Why We Want It'.
- Campaign diary: he is not relying on the iCan campaign page to achieve his objectives, but understands that he must campaign in the real world. He is using the campaign diary to log this activity.
- Support: he has managed to secure 22 signed-in supporters – i.e. people who are prepared to put their name to supporting his campaign. He has probably had to lobby individuals offline in order to achieve this.

More Motocross Tracks

WHAT WE WANT:
More motocross tracks to be open, or places to ride a dirt bike.

WHY WE WANT IT:
Because even though dirt bike sales have increased in the last few years, more and more tracks are closing. This doesn't help the problem of illegal riding. Riding illegally is dangerous as there are no emergency facilities. Most of the time, these places have been blocked off to cars. This means that... more

To all iCan users: You can let this campaign know whether you support it or not. Vote by clicking one of the buttons below.

Users who are signed-in can vote more than once, so the figures for "others" should be treated with caution.

Support?
22 signed-in users
and 152 others

Oppose?
0 signed-in users
and 11 others

WHO IS BEHIND THIS?
Most recent 1

CAMPAIGN DIARY

These are the diary entries for this campaign.

Email from Essex police
Posted by Travis Mattinson on Tuesday 27 January, 2004 21:30

Travis, I do hear what you say, please understand that I have been riding bikes for over 30 years my... more

Letter to Essex police
Posted by Travis Mattinson on Tuesday 27 January, 2004 10:58

Here's my response: Dear Mr Rawlings, Thank you for such a detailed... more

Letter from Essex police
Posted by Travis Mattinson on Tuesday 27 January, 2004 10:15

I received a letter from Essex police this morning, although he says that there are treating the matter... more
Guide

This is a user-submitted advice guide. It is a clear step-by-step guide on how successfully to establish a residents' association – a good example of a user sharing expertise.

Guide: 15 Top Tips to Starting a Residents Group

Written by: John Dawson
Glasgow City

The views expressed in this guide are those of its author and not the BBC
If you think the iCan rules have been broken, please tell us.

15 Top Tips For Starting An Association from Crown Gardens:
www.crowngardens.info

01. Do People Really Want an Association?
Don't start out assuming people want an association...better to make the first meeting about whether or not there should be an association and if so, what type? Some people don't want one, some want a complaints organisation (that is, they complain and someone else does the work), others want a social group, some see it as an enabling group (helps people to help themselves), others view it merely as a local authority watch dog...it could be all of these!

02. Start with a Bang!
Have your initial setup meeting as a social event in as good a venue as you can. People are much more likely to attend if it sounds like they might also enjoy themselves.

03. Fundraise from the Outset.
Make sure you start with a development fee to help you get going.
This is a good example of the kind of considered exchange of views that we are trying to encourage in iCan. The user submitted this piece after reading some other material in iCan that he considered hostile or insufficiently supportive of the police. It is an alternative perspective which describes the difficulties facing the police. Because of the way our taxonomy works, it will always appear in the 'More on subject' box on the right hand side whenever anyone reads anything in iCan about the police. So the user has ensured that his perspective is available a click away from the kind of perspective about which he was concerned.
G. Martin Wagner, Associate Administrator for Governmentwide Policy, US General Services Administration

e-Democracy and e-Government in the United States

e-Democracy in the US has been evolving in theory and practice, to some extent, as technology has become more ubiquitous. Like many of the opportunities for implementing technological advances, it is often not only the technology that is the challenge but the acceptance, trust and use by the user community. However, the US has not aggressively sought e-democracy as an objective in the same way that it has pursued implementing e-government initiatives.

The US has several efforts underway that are intended to enable active citizen participation with their Government, whether it be at the Federal, State or local levels. Areas that will be discussed in this paper are Federal-wide e-government initiatives that support participation in the regulatory process, e-voting and the identification and trust issues.

The input of the interest groups

Currently, the major interest groups surrounding the legislative and regulatory processes in the US employ all the latest technology to maximize their input and access to the decision-making processes. This gives a significant advantage to the large and well-funded interests to the disadvantage of the new startups and to smaller organizations without the financial support. So, not only is there an issue with direct voting in the legislative process, but the technology magnifies the influence of money in the process by converting dollars to access and influence through the best use of technology. Special interest groups have their email listservs to notify constituents of pending issues before Congress and the regulators.

Some groups are using auto-dial phone calls and email systems to contact pre-profiled citizens to create a huge citizen response to legislators on key issues. The systems permit citizens to push one button to cause extensive communications to go to numerous Congressional offices – overcoming the effort barrier of citizens and multiplying the influence on the issue.

Participation in the regulatory process

To increase transparency and make access easier to the regulatory process, e-rulemaking is a means to e-democracy by allowing citizens to have more direct access to proposed regulations that set public policy.

Businesses and individuals can access federal regulations on the Internet, but the process of gathering regulatory information online can be frustrating. The public must know the agencies responsible for developing a regulation in order to view it through individual agency websites or the Federal Register. Additionally, online access to comments about regulations, along with other supporting documents, is limited. Individuals and businesses should be able to easily and quickly learn about regulations that may affect them, making such gaps in online access to the regulatory process unacceptable.

The US Government’s eRulemaking initiative (www.regulations.gov/eRuleMaking.cfm) will close these gaps and transform the current rulemaking process by improving the access to, and
quality of, the rulemaking process for individuals, businesses, and other government entities while streamlining and increasing the efficiency of internal agency processes. Key objectives of the initiative include:

- Creating a government-wide, centralized online capability to access and search all publicly available regulatory material no matter what stage of adoption.
- Providing an easy and consistent way for the public to find and comment on proposed rules.
- Building a unified, cost-effective ‘back room’ regulatory management system to ensure efficiency, economies of scale, and consistency for public customers and the government.
- Many things about E-Gov (www.whitehouse.gov/omb/egov), the Government’s program for expanding electronic government, have worked to achieve results. The concept of building once and using many times to leverage IT investments to provide cheaper, faster, and more efficient services to the public has been a success. However, the implementation of the E-Gov initiatives has posed a variety of challenges.

The public participation that eRulemaking has brought to the arena of e-democracy is a byproduct of the initiative. Making the rulemaking process more transparent has offered a new dimension to public participation. Allowing comments to all proposed regulations in one place, as opposed to searching the Federal Register document and then emailing/mailing comments, allows the public to comment more easily. Questions include: How much increased value comes from more input? Do the Federal agencies have the staff to increase the amount of access and communication with citizens on issues?

Success factors

1. The Governance Structures that we have set up to channel important decisions through the appropriate executives has been effective.
2. Managing milestones and project plans to deliver results and then use a scorecard to keep track of it.

Challenges

- The shared funding models are the most complicated area of E-Gov because it is a play/pay partnership. The biggest challenge is creating a good value proposition for E-Gov initiatives in a short-term timeline (1-2 fiscal years).
- Transformation of a culture that is traditionally stove-piped and unwilling to change.
- Communication of the work we are doing to explain to everyone that e-government is more than just IT, but it is changing business processes.
- Difficulty in measuring the outcomes or results because our goal often centers around ‘making it easier’ to work with the federal government (customer satisfaction is not something that the government has traditionally monitored.)

These problems have been facilitated by executive sponsorship of these projects through the President’s Management Agenda and the Office of Management and Budget oversight. The problems have been facilitated by executive support at the CIO level.

Policies, methods and tools for success

The methodology that is necessary to ensure success of E-Gov is to institutionalize the ‘new processes’ into the agency at its core mission level. Once the business process is changed to
reflect a ‘federal’ way of doing business, then it should be solidified through a policy that can be shared and disseminated to all parties involved.

The business needs should always drive these projects and the goal should be to remove the technical barriers involved. Academic researchers can continue to support the social statistics of the value of e-democracy and make the case that it is important to involved the public in government processes.

**Metrics**

Table 1 below summarizes the cumulative usage figures from January 2003 through March 2004 for the volume of use and number of comments received by Regulations.gov, the US Government’s website to facilitate participation in Federal rulemaking.

**Table 1. Cumulative usage figures for Regulations.gov, January 2003 to March 2004**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<td>Comments received</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Creating trust with citizens**

To ensure use of the technology, we must create a trusted environment. To ensure fair use of the technology, we must ensure that citizens are who they say they are online. This authentication is a critical, and challenging requirement. The E-Authentication Initiative ([www.cio.gov/eauthentication](http://www.cio.gov/eauthentication)) enables e-democracy by reducing the burden on citizens, businesses, governments, and internal employees seeking to access government services electronically. The Initiative allows use of existing credentials of their choosing to access services online within a secure, trusted environment, resulting in greater convenience, cost savings, simplicity, and trust.

Trust and access to online services has two key authentication requirements that are addressed within the established policy and operational framework: agencies can rely on validation that users are who they say they are; and users have confidence that personal information is being protected. Pew Internet Foundation found 62% of Americans say that we need new laws to make sure that citizens’ privacy is protected from government agencies and 71% of Internet users want control over how Internet sites track their web activities.

**Challenges**

The greatest obstacles hampering E-Authentication efforts have been:

- Establishing enterprise-level security governance. Cross-agency committees are now in place to provide governance.
- Finding a government-wide approach that works without establishing a national identifier for each user. Compliance with privacy laws was built into the policies and architecture of the initiative. We moved away from a centralized model to a federated identity management model that better addresses privacy issues.
• Complexity of migration efforts to more uniform enterprise architecture approaches. A component model of authentication is being pursued to simplify establishing and monitoring trusted connections. Scalability and single point of failure vulnerability were improved by this new approach.

• Stove-piped individual application-level implementation of separate authentication and access control systems built on proprietary offerings that may not interoperate with other systems. Guidance now requires agencies to comply with E-Authentication Initiative policy and architecture.

• Organizational resistance to common enterprise-level shared services that eliminate the need to build individual authentication capabilities at the application level. There is a concerted effort to educate agencies about the benefits of a unified system of authentication.

• Cost, usability and adequate deployment support for strong certificate-based authentication solutions (public key infrastructure). Cost is coming down, but many still perceive it as a restrictive investment.

• Fair and supportable funding model. Agency contributions are funding start-up; per-transaction or subscription approaches are being considered for long-term funding. Agencies need more help determining full cost.

**Policies, Methods and Tools for Success**

Building a trust framework for e-government has four important building blocks that provide a policy infrastructure to establish consistent online identity verification. They are:

1. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Establishment of four levels of assurance, based on risk.
2. National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) SP800-63, companion technical guidance for each assurance level.
3. Assessment criteria for credential providers, mapping authentication methods to assurance levels.
4. Operating rules to be observed by credential providers and relying parties.

Key tools and methods, including the following successful features, support the E-Authentication Initiative policy infrastructure:

• Maintaining a list of tested interoperable technology products.
• Maintaining a list of approved credential service providers.
• Providing access to approved service providers through a standing contract. This contract vehicle is now open to anyone (citizens, businesses, state/local governments) for purchasing services.
• Provision of a risk assessment tool (E-RA) for agency applications to determine the level of risk and corresponding assurance level for each application
• Providing ‘application managers’ to help agencies conduct their risk assessment, and connect to Initiative authentication services.
• Establishment of technical interface specifications.
• Providing a laboratory to test and certify interoperability between COTS (commercial off the shelf) technology products; only open standards based products are acceptable.
• Management of agency, credential service provider, and industry relationships

In addition to challenges identified above, there is a need to keep pace with constantly evolving technology advances and agency requirements, which may be complex. The Initiative must meet a higher standard of near perfection in addressing privacy and security for citizens,
businesses and governments to trust it. Internal and external reviews, such as General Accounting Office (GAO) and Inspector General (IG) evaluations, media and Congressional interest, special-interest group issues largely related to privacy, research groups, and others provide a daily need to communicate a clear, consistent and simple message of what E-Authentication does to improve delivery of government services.

Critical to the success of E-Authentication is leveraging from a federated identity model through the reuse of credentials and private sector solutions to improve service to citizens. Citizens have already embraced using authenticated identity cards such as those used by the banking system, so building on this existing model will make acceptance more likely.

The US has also decided to participate in the Electronic Authentication Partnership (EAP), a public-private effort to establish a national trust framework. Our E-Authentication Initiative policies and technical approaches have proved to be leading edge, and are currently being used by the EAP to enhance the efforts of the public-private partnership.

*Metrics*

- Increase citizen participation and use of Government online services
- Deploy online applications that are able to leverage credentials from a variety of trusted sources, allowing citizens to choose.

*Summary*

The United States is creative in developing technologies. It often takes a few years to fully realize the potential of emerging technologies. We’re just beginning to test what can be done in the area of e-democracy. The future remains promising, particularly as citizen expectations propel us forward.
UK e-Democracy Projects: Experiences, Plans and the Role of Policy Makers, Experts and Researchers

UK e-democracy projects

The UK Government issued a consultation document in July 2002 on e-democracy, called *In the Service of Democracy* (available on [www.edemocracy.gov.uk](http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk)). This recognised the challenges facing democratic participation, and the potential of e-democracy to help. Two areas of e-democracy were defined – participation at elections (*e-voting*) and participation between elections (*e-participation*).

*e-Voting*

The Government is committed to the modernisation of the electoral process and aims to hold an e-enabled general election some time after 2006. It has in train a programme to develop systems that will need to be in place for an e-enabled general election, and to develop public confidence and familiarity with them.

At the 2003 local elections, 17 local authorities took part in the largest test of remote e-voting at any public election so far, using a variety of different channels. The results were very encouraging. While the use of e-voting channels had a mixed impact on overall turnout (the average increase was less than 5 percent), they were well used, with more than 20 percent of voters choosing to use them over the traditional methods. In addition, there were no reports of any security breaches and, on the whole, the technology performed well throughout the three weeks that electronic voting channels were open. The independent Electoral Commission evaluated each pilot and published a report¹ and a strategic review of all the pilots. The 2004 combined local and European Parliamentary elections do not allow an opportunity for piloting e-voting this year, but the programme will continue in the future.

*e-Participation*

There have been numerous examples of e-participation carried out by the UK Government, the devolved administrations of Scotland and Wales, and local authorities. It would be difficult to attempt to summarise them, let alone in the space available here. However, two good starting points are a review of a number of UK Parliament, Scottish executive and Whitehall department projects in *Hearing Voices: The Experience of Online Public Consultations and Discussions in UK Governance* (available to order from [www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/archive](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/archive)) and *Casting the Web Wider* ([www.idea.gov.uk/publications/?id=ca174](http://www.idea.gov.uk/publications/?id=ca174) again available to order) which sets out a number of local government projects. The main lesson is that e-participation is relatively immature. The range of technological options deployed in projects has been relatively narrow. Roll-out has been patchy and has not become embedded within organisations, except at a very basic level. There are important cultural and structural issues to address, particularly on managing deliberation effectively, recruiting audiences and being responsive to what people say. e-Participative methods should also clearly be additional to, not a replacement for, offline participative methods.

Consequent changes in democratic practices, processes and structures

There have been legislative changes to enable the roll out of e-voting pilots and full adoption of e-voting will require more. There have been interesting experiments in the online pre-legislative scrutiny of the Communications Bill, online evidence-gathering from the victims of domestic violence and online Q&A sessions with ministers. e-Petitions in Scotland have led to petitioners giving direct evidence to Parliamentary committees and to legislative change. All government consultations are now available and can be responded to online. The number of representatives with websites and contactable by e-mail is steadily increasing. A few have weblogs. However, it is very much early days and changes in democratic practices, processes and structures are not yet being defined by e-democracy.

3. What’s next – and what is stopping us?

The programme of e-voting pilots will continue but its nature, scale and timing still needs to be scoped and agreed.

On e-participation, the main planks of future work are to:

- roll out a £4m Local Government National Project on e-democracy and its complementary working with the UK government;
- raise knowledge and capability within government through guidance, case studies and knowledge sharing;
- secure active support and input from a wide range of stakeholders;
- encourage, guide and capture learning from new projects;
- explore e-participative possibilities within the new e-government portal, DirectGov; and
- build a business case for e-participation.

There is nothing to stop us getting on with this agenda, but we need to recognise some factors which may influence what we can and cannot do:

- if a general election is held in 2005 and coincides with local elections, that would have an impact on piloting e-voting in that year;
- while it is obviously a key player, Government does not ‘own’ e-democracy e.g. decisions on how representatives and representative structures adapt to e-democracy are not for government;
- other players, e.g. NGOs, citizens, media organisations have important roles in e-democracy and government should not crowd them out;
- there is no single commonly recognised place on the web for UK democratic participation, and neither do we know what one would look like;
- it can be difficult to recruit the right participants for projects;
- it is mainly local issues that would interest people in participation, but responsibility for many of these issues are often owned at national level or shared between various bodies and tiers of government; and
- individuals’ use of the Internet has not yet progressed to the stage where there is a critical mass of demand for online participation – offline remains important.

How can policy makers, technical experts or academic researchers contribute to the future success of e-democracy projects?

For policy makers

The need to:

- Take a broad view of the potential benefits of democratic participation – a cultural shift from the traditional ways of policy making, for example, a greater emphasis on the concept of public value (see Creating Public Value, Strategy Unit www.strategy.gov.uk/output/page699.asp).

- Consider how participation could enrich the policy development and delivery process throughout the policy cycle, not just towards the end.

- Develop connections between policies and people which can encourage democratic participation.

- Join-up participation on issues across tiers and geographical divisions of government to make it more relevant and accessible.

- Get a better grasp of target audiences, what they want to engage on, their needs, preferences and how best to engage them, including making best use of online spaces which are trusted and well used by specific groups.

- Include representatives and representative bodies in the public participation process.

- Provide accessible guidance and examples, encouragement and help in initiating, running, participating in and evaluating appropriately differentiated e-democracy projects as part of an integrated engagement strategy.

For technical experts

A requirement for developing tools to:

a. Enable more direct access by citizens to representative decision making and processes – and to make those processes easier for elected representatives, for example:
   - petitioning tools;
   - pre-legislative consideration;
   - deliberation;
   - scrutiny; and
   - searchable, video, audio, documentary, multi-lingual and visually and linguistically simple ways for to access information resources.

b. Enable elected representative’s greater ability to:
   - collect and share evidence on policy issues;
   - analyse policy issues;
   - develop and prioritise policy options;
   - deliberate;
   - define and deliver effective strategies for democratic engagement on specific issues;
   - play their full part in executive decision making; and
   - enable two-way communications with and between their constituents.

c. Enable government bodies to improve their strategies for public participation by:
   - providing a ‘managing agent’ approach to designing and delivering a range of appropriate offline and online activities, drawing in different specialist suppliers;
   - providing roadmaps and case histories to demonstrate which methods and media work best in specific circumstances;
   - developing bundles of applications which could be used for different stages or objectives in the policy cycle; and
• tools which automatically collate numerical responses and can summarise free text responses.

For academics

Undertake research into:
a. Identifying the issues, the methods, the channels and the associated political context (e.g. responsiveness) that would engender high degrees of engagement, dialogue and deliberation from citizens – by important socio-economic groups. In particular, examining the role of and how best to support:
   • intermediaries;
   • local online communities.
b. How to transfer lessons from the offline environment into the online environment in respect of
   • best practice in conflict resolution and consensus building;
   • best practice in developing and choosing between alternative options for democratic consideration, ensuring that all substantial views are reflected in the options put forward for decision making, that consensus has developed on the final decision which is the best one possible in the light of all the evidence.
c. Producing guidance and case studies in forms which are accessible and helpful to policy makers.
Innovations in Communications Technologies and the Democratic Process: Recent US Projects and Lessons Learned

Democracy is an interactive form of governance consisting almost entirely of communications – between citizens, organizations, candidates and elected officials. Changes in communications technologies can significantly affect the nature, quality and quantity of the communicative interactions that comprise the democratic process.

Two fundamental questions arise: Can we shape the new communications process in ways that sustain the values of democracy – fairness, equality, deliberation, truth, trust and balance? Will elected officials, who possess the power to adopt new digital communications systems, embrace them as supportive of democracy, or resist them as threatening to their own personal and institutional interests?

Recent Projects

1. Digital Democracy: a new web-based e-mail system to encourage communication between public officials, citizens and civic organizations on policy issues

An under-developed area of e-democracy is configuring digital technologies to encourage greater citizen-to-elected official interactions over ongoing policy questions. We are therefore testing a new web-based system called ‘Digital Democracy’. This inexpensive, easy-to-use system provides government officials with online templates to enable them to conduct a dialogue with citizens over pending policy issues. It is designed to encourage citizens to participate more actively in the policy-setting activities of government and link the actions of government officials more closely to the wishes of citizens.

Citizens will be able to:
- Tell public officials which issues interest them by clicking issues on websites.
- Receive e-mail from public officials describing pending policy decisions.
- Answer survey questions and comment on pending legislation by e-mail.
- Receive feedback from public officials on poll results and enacted legislation.
- Obtain further information on the legislative issues being discussed.
- Increase their policy involvement through other activities (e.g. volunteering, attending town hall meetings, etc.).

Elected officials will be able to:
- Build a database of constituent e-mail addresses and substantive concerns.
- Solicit public comment via e-mail on specific issues coming up for debate.
- Conduct online polls to gain insight into constituent opinions.
- Auto-respond with substantive answers.
- Manage constituent contacts efficiently.
- Administer system without HTML experience or complicated training.
- Solve e-mail overload problems.
We are currently meeting with elected officials to discuss our prototype and will incorporate their suggestions into the final working model. With sufficient funding, we will build, install and test the system, then make it available to the public, candidates and elected officials at all levels of government.¹

2. Video Voter: a new system of voter information distributed via cable TV, DTV, DBS and the Internet, to be viewed in real time or on-demand through digital video recorders, video-on-demand systems and streamed Internet video

This project will provide voters with video coverage of candidates and ballot measure committees in real time or on-demand (www.videovoter.org). It has three components:

- **Production:** We are working with PEG (Public, Educational and Governmental) access producers who have studios connected to cable television systems. We are helping them design relatively simple and inexpensive video formats (talking heads, interviews, forums) to allow candidate and ballot measure committees to state their views.

- **Distribution:** We are encouraging distribution of these videos over public, educational and governmental access cable television channels, public television, university television and digital TVs, as well as streamed over the Internet.

- **Retrieval:** We are working with digital video recorder companies (e.g. TiVo) and video-on-demand cable TV companies to design menus and keywords, so that voters can order and capture Video Voter clips and view them on-demand before each election.

In a digital age in which transmission and storage capacity are doubling every twelve to six months, respectively, citizens will soon have access to tens or hundreds of thousands of video programs. They will need sophisticated online menus and search mechanisms to find the programming they want. Video Voter will allow multiple studios to produce video voter statements in different formats, distribute them via multiple delivery systems (cable TV, digital television, Direct Broadcast Satellites, cell phones and the Internet), and then allow voters to find and view them in real time or on-demand through digital video recorders, video-on-demand or the Internet.

3. Online circulation of ballot initiatives: designing a system

We are currently exploring the technology necessary to design and implement an online system of ballot initiative circulation and qualification. In California, for example, a statutory ballot initiative proponent must raise valid signatures from registered voters equal to five percent of the votes cast for governor in the last state election (about 400,000). Today every circulation effort uses paid signature gatherers who earn $2 or more per signature. Any initiative can be qualified for the ballot if the proponents can spend over $1 million to quality it. As a result, well-financed interest groups have a far easier time qualifying initiatives than lesser-funded citizen groups.

Online circulation might provide citizens with the ability to qualify initiatives without multi-million dollar investments. At the same time, online circulation might jam the ballots with excessive numbers of measures. We are therefore discussing a number of ‘checks and balances’ on the process of online circulation, including:

- **Additional signatures:** Ballot measure circulation committees might be required to obtain a larger number (e.g. double) of electronic than written signatures.

¹ See [www.cgs.org/projects/media/digitaldemocracy/indexframe.html](http://www.cgs.org/projects/media/digitaldemocracy/indexframe.html) for a demonstration prototype.
• **Electronic cooling-off period:** Electronic signatures would be valid only if signors entered them twice, separated by at least a week.

• **Review of pros and cons:** Citizens electronically signing ballot measure petitions might be required first to review (or scroll through) pages containing arguments for and against such measures or lists of supporters and opponents.

• **Online questionnaire:** Citizens wishing to sign an electronically circulated ballot measure petition might first be required to answer a brief questionnaire about the measure to demonstrate basic understanding (costs, impacts, etc.).

These are simple examples to illustrate possible legal parameters to the online circulation process.


From 1993 to 2001, we built and operated the nation’s largest online system of candidate debate and voter information (DNet). DNet allowed candidates to enter a password and then submit statements of up to 1000 words on any number of issues they selected or created. Candidate statements were automatically e-mailed to all other candidates in the same race, and they were given a chance to respond. Statements were arrayed in a grid, with checkmarks indicating that a statement had been submitted or a ‘no comment’ where a reply had not been received.

During the 2002 U.S. elections, DNet hosted statements by 25,000 candidates and 630 ballot measure committees. It received 68 million hits, 20 million page views and an average visitor session of over 17 minutes. In the 2004 elections, DNet, now operated by the National League of Women Voters Education Fund in cooperation with CapitolAdvantage (see [www.dnet.org](http://www.dnet.org)), will also appear on a number of commercial websites, including AOL, MSN, Yahoo, USA Today, NY Times, LA Times, Fox News and C-SPAN. DNet has also helped to reshape the electoral dialogue. Candidate statements over DNet tend to address a broader range of issues than do candidates in radio or television ads, are more substantive, are less negative, improve the visibility of lesser-known or minority party candidates, can be multi-lingual and can reduce campaign finance disparities (since voters determine how much time they will spend reviewing candidate statements, not the candidates’ advertising budgets).

5. **Video-on-demand cable TV voter information systems: Time Warner, Orlando, Florida (1996) and Altroio Cable, Pasadena, California (2002)**

In 1996, we designed and operated the first fully digital video-on-demand voter information system for Time Warner’s ‘Full Service Network’ Digital Cable TV system in Orlando, Florida. We videotaped questions from citizens, sent transcripts to presidential and congressional candidates and then videotaped candidate replies. Voters could select ‘Election 1996’ from a menu, view citizens’ questions (e.g. John: ‘What are you going to do about Social Security reform?’) and then watch the candidate’s answers. Unfortunately, Time Warner shut down its system after the election, so we were not able to obtain any usage data.

In 2002, we designed a video-on-demand voter information system for Altroio Communications in Pasadena, California. We videotaped statements by congressional candidates, state assembly candidates and ballot measure committees, digitized them and placed them on Altroio’s hard disk drives. Cable TV viewers could go to their video-on-demand menu, select Election 2002 and
watch the video clips on their TVs. They could pause, fast forward and rewind the clips. Focus groups strongly preferred video-on-demand access to candidate statements.


Between 1987 and 1993, we built and operated a statewide public affairs cable TV channel that provided gavel-to-gavel coverage of the California state legislature’s floor proceedings, as well as committee hearings, governor and legislator press conferences and oral arguments before the California Supreme Court. We raised several million dollars in foundation and corporate funding, persuaded the legislature to install remotely-controlled cameras in the State Assembly and Senate, and obtained funding from the California cable TV industry to build the network. In 1993, the California Cable Television Association took over its operation, now guarantees its funding and makes it available to over 6 million California homes. The California Channel is now the largest state public affairs network in the nation (www.calchannel.com).


Somewhat tangential to the OII conference, we are conducting feasibility studies into the creation of an online archive of public policy research. The PolicyArchive would contain searchable full texts and summaries of public policy research, initially from nonprofit organizations and later from academic, government and corporate sources. It would contain a search engine and e-mail outreach capabilities, allowing user notification whenever new research was available. If built, the PolicyArchive would offer research to citizens wishing to inform themselves on current public policy questions, thereby supplementing other efforts at creating a stronger e-democracy.

Lessons Learned

We have experienced at least five barriers to the growth of effective e-democracy:

1. Political factors

Elected and public officials often do not see it in their self-interest or their institutional interest to adopt and use new systems of improved communication with voters or citizens. Some examples:

- Project Vote Smart (PVS) sends a National Political Awareness Test to thousands of candidates, asks them to declare their positions on a wide range of issues, and posts the responses on their website (www.vote-smart.org) candidates do not believe it is in their best interests to respond to the multiple-choice questions, fearing being pigeonholed by yes–no answers. Many fear losing voters who might disagree with them or becoming the target of negative TV ads based on the statements. Others fear that complicated issues defy simple answers. At times, fewer than 10% of candidates contacted by PVS have filled out the survey.²

- DNet has a higher rate of participation (because candidates can create their own statements instead of responding to a more rigid questionnaire), but many candidates decline to use DNet’s opportunities, or only provide general information (background, biographical information) instead of specific positions on the merits of issues. They, too, are afraid that a clear statement on the issues will lose voters or attract negative radio and TV commercials from opponents or issue groups.

² See www.loper.org/~george/archives/2003/Sep/948.html
During the testing of our Digital Democracy e-mail prototype, some elected officials have expressed interest in using it to contact voters and receive their opinions on pending substantive issues. But some have also said they do not want to spell out their own positions or votes in return e-mails to voters. They fear the loss of voter support or a negative media campaign against them as a consequence.

In sum, some public officials see their short-term interests (being re-elected, protecting themselves against negative publicity, shoring up their parties, raising money) as inconsistent with the stated long-term interests of academics and reformers in improving the e-democratic process.

2. Financial factors

e-Democracy can be expensive. A number of highly creative efforts at enhancing political communication were made during the dot-com years of the late 1990s. Grassroots.com (I served as Chairman for a year), Voter.com and Speakout.com, for example, all tried to build destination websites that would provide users with political news, allow them to create or join political organizations, and link them up with civic organizations through sophisticated e-mail systems. All failed or were radically reconfigured. All discovered that they could not generate sufficient revenues to maintain their well-intentioned efforts.

The Democracy Network faced a challenge typical of nonprofit technology endeavors. Unlike most business propositions where more money can be made as the product becomes more popular, DNet had the opposite problem. The more popular it became, the more it cost to maintain servers, bandwidth and customer support infrastructures to handle the demand from candidates and the public. This is a challenge for any nonprofit e-democracy endeavor that seeks its funding from foundations or government. Success can be financially prohibitive.

Some systems (e.g. our Digital Democracy) may ultimately require public officials to pay to defray ongoing operating expenses. Government budgets, however, are typically tight. Elected officials may resist spending public money on new systems of democratic communication, especially when they are uncertain these systems will help elect them, keep them in office or advance their prospects for higher office.

3. Skill and training

Many public officials lack the skills and training to use new e-democracy systems of communication. Some examples:

• In 1997, we persuaded the City of Los Angeles to offer all candidates for citywide office the ability to submit two-minute videotaped statements on behalf of their candidacies. These statements would be repeatedly broadcast free of charge over the city’s cable TV channel for three weeks before the election. Surprisingly, no candidates accepted the offer. When queried, they said they did not know how to create videotaped statements. Only when we arranged free studio time and booked their appointments did candidates (somewhat over one-half of them) take advantage of this opportunity for free publicity.

• DNet allows candidates to enter free statements on substantive issues from their own computers. In the early years and at the local level, many candidates reported they did not know how to use their computers to access the Internet and take advantage of this free opportunity. Others lost their passwords, were technophobic or lacked issue positions.
Some commercially available systems for handling constituent e-mail (‘CRM’ or Constituent Relationship Management software) are so complicated that it takes days or weeks of specialized training to master. Most elected officials (below the Congressional level) lack the time or money to train their staff to acquire the necessary skills.

4. Creativity

Commercial entrepreneurs who believe they can generate sufficient financial returns to justify their initial investments develop most online software applications. These entrepreneurs are not typically experienced in the operations of democratic governance. They are also not motivated to improve the democratic process, but instead simply to make it more efficient or cost-effective. In our experience, there is a need for a pool of creative nonprofit entrepreneurs who understand both democracy and the newer digital communications technologies, and who are willing to develop new communications systems that will actually sustain and promote democracy instead of merely helping it to improve its efficiency or generate new commercial revenue streams.

5. Research

Successful private companies often spend extensive sums on market research before launching new products. Nonprofit and academic organizations wishing to create new e-democracy systems, however, typically lack the finances to research their ideas before launch. They are forced to gamble – designing the best systems they can conceive without market research. Some examples:

- In 1993, we began designing our first system of on-demand information in video formats (DNet). We could not find research on how to lay out an on-screen menu, whether voters would use a remote ‘air mouse’, whether candidate statements should be short (thirty seconds) or long (ten minutes), whether candidates would prepare statement, and whether voters would view them. It would have cost more to investigate these questions than actually build a working prototype. We opted for the latter.

- In 2001, we began redesigning our Video Voter system. We were unable to find research on the formats voters would prefer (talking-head statements, interviews, debates, round-table discussions). Extensive testing was prohibitively expensive.

Detailed market research of e-democracy systems is generally unavailable before product launch. Moreover, research is still sketchy on key aspects of the democratic process itself (e.g. if one could provide voters with any kind of information they might wish, in any format, and over any delivery system, what would they prefer?).

Suggestions

Some suggestions for the next stage of e-democracy include:

1. Multiple platforms

Attention should not be confined to just one technology (e.g. the Internet). In the digital age, all political communications will be reduced to a digital bit-stream, and the bits will be distributed by Internet, television, cable television, satellite television, cell phone, microwave, optical fiber and wireless networks. Users will ultimately not care how they receive this data, only how useful it is and how quickly they can access what they need. e-Democracy projects should therefore consider integration of technologies through multiple platforms. Examples:
• Create a website that will allow the user to program a Digital Video Recorder (TiVo) from a remote location so that it will record a televised political press conference, candidate interview or ballot measure commercial.

• Create online avatars to recommend video programs to capture and view. In a world of thousands of video streams, we will need to follow the recommendations of experienced insiders. Thus, a viewer might click on a website with the ‘recommendations of the Republican Party’, or ‘Ralph Nader’s best bets’, and have their home TV system automatically record the programs these sources recommend.

• Many cell phones are now equipped with cameras and could be used to create video action alerts. Elected officials, candidates, or organizations can reach out for real-time input from supporters and constituents, or call them to action at the touch of a button.

2. Multidisciplinary research

Universities might pool their talents to examine new digital forms of political communication. Departments of communication, political science, computer science, law, anthropology, sociology and public policy might experiment jointly with the creation and testing of communications systems to improve the democratic process. Examples:

• Online voting systems clearly require technical innovations to guarantee security, privacy, accuracy and voter confidence. But what laws should shape their development? What social impacts will they have on voter turnout (will the ease of voting diminish its sanctity, therefore reducing participation)?

• How should institutions of direct democracy be legally shaped in the digital age? What effects will they have on institutions of representative government?

• Can online systems of deliberation be created to simulate the procedures of parliamentary bodies (motions, votes, resolutions, compromises), thereby allowing large numbers of citizen-legislators to enact legislation virtually?

• Can 3-D computer simulations be created to allow voters to ‘talk’ directly to candidates, engaging their simulations in conversation about specific issues? Would voters use these systems if they existed?

Ideally, multi-disciplinary consortia of scholars and practitioners should explore these and other ideas.
Rona Zevin, Director, Office of Electronic Communications, City of Seattle

Seattle’s Democracy Portal

Key ingredients for a successful e-democracy initiative

According to a study conducted for The Council for Excellence in Government in 2002,¹ the public’s biggest hope for e-government was for it to make government more accountable. When asked about the most important way that e-government could improve government accountability, the three most frequently cited ways were: allowing citizens to communicate their opinions on major issues to officials quickly and easily; allowing citizens to tell government agencies about the information they need or problems they experience; and giving the public more information about the government’s policies and decisions.

Seattle is one of the most ‘wired’ and technologically literate communities in the world. Our most recent statistics show that more than 75 percent of all residents have home Internet access, and more than 50 percent of those have broadband connections.² Even more than half of our seniors have home Internet access. Seattle also has an active citizenry that is knowledgeable about and engaged in civic and community affairs. And our elected officials are committed to broadening citizen participation. These three ingredients are key ingredients for a successful e-democracy initiative.

To be a national leader in using technology to dramatically expand civic engagement and public discourse. This is the goal statement recommended by the Seattle Commission on Electronic Communications, a volunteer citizen group that worked with staff to create a new vision and roadmap to enhance our city government television channel and its website.³ We refer to this initiative as Seattle’s ‘Democracy Portal’.

Aims of the Democracy Portal Initiative

Our Democracy Portal is not about electronic voting; this is a function controlled by other levels of government. It is about creating an informed and active electorate, and about facilitating involvement in the decisions that affect their daily lives.

The City of Seattle has long been a leader in the use of web technology to provide information to citizens, and was among the first to provide online services. And like most cities in the US, we operated a government access television station; these stations are typically like local versions of C-SPAN, covering major meetings and producing some programs about city services. Both the website and TV channel have been tools to promote transparency in government, one of the key elements in any successful e-democracy initiative. But this is only a first step. The decision-making process needs to be open, but it also needs to be comprehensible and easy to access.

¹ See www.excelgov.org/displayContent.asp?Keyword=ppp022602 for the study, e-Government to Connect, Protect, and Serve Us.
² For comparison, a recent Pew Internet research survey found 39 percent of home Internet users had broadband connections nationwide. See www.pewInternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=120
³ The full report can be found at www.seattle.gov/scec
Two years ago we began transforming the channel into a more independent programming source, using both TV and the web to make governmental decision-making more accessible to our residents.

The Seattle Channel

www.seattlechannel.org is a government website with a difference. As a companion to the City’s main website, www.seattle.gov, The Seattle Channel website organizes information by issues and tries to help interested residents to understand and participate in decisions on those issues.

Like many such channels, it is a window on government. About 30 hours of weekly City Council meetings are broadcast and videostreamed live. There is an indexed archive of more than 1200 videos of meetings and other public affairs programs. These videos are indexed so it is not necessary to watch the entire meeting to hear about one topic under discussion. During many public hearings, official testimony is taken by e-mail as well as in person. Over 1000 people participated in the City’s last budget process using e-mail, which is now the predominant method of communication with elected officials.

The Channel’s website provides detailed information about the top issues and projects going on in the city. For a typical issue, the website will include:

- Background on the issue or topic and the organizations that are involved;
- Videos of relevant public meetings, hearings, forums and other programs;
- Information on upcoming community meetings;
- Recent updates as events occur or decisions are made;
- Links to related information on the City and other websites, news releases, local new stories and reader comments.

The site includes a daily set of links to local media stories on civic issues, turning us into a one-stop site for a quick overview of what is in the news, and easy access to more in-depth information.

TV programming on the Seattle Channel has been expanded to create several weekly and monthly public affairs programs, produced and hosted by contract journalists. There is a revealing study conducted by the Alliance for Better Campaigns titled All Politics is Local but you wouldn’t know it by Watching Local TV. The study examined programming on 45 local television stations for the week of October 5 through October 11, 2003 and found there is a near blackout of local public affairs. Of the 7,560 hours of programming analyzed, less than one half of one percent – 13 hours – were devoted to local public affairs shows. The Seattle Channel is trying to fill this void in local public affairs programming.

A recent innovation is a program that awards small grants to community-based organizations for civic involvement projects. Seattle has a Technology Matching Fund, which has supported technology literacy and access projects to address the digital divide since the mid-1990’s. This year, the program funded several electronic democracy projects that use e-mail, the Internet or other e-tools to increase communication with government and solve community problems. Eligible projects had to:

1. increase awareness of community issues;
2. increase community participation in problem solving; and
3. increase interaction with government.

We also began a partnership with the Annenberg Student Voices Project, a national effort to educate high school students about civic engagement. Students are using the Seattle Channel website to learn about issues, and we are creating a series of four programs where they have the chance to ask questions of top government officials, including the Mayor and the Chief of Police.

Assessment of the Democracy Portal: successes and challenges

The ultimate success of our Democracy Portal needs to be measured in whether participation changes the outcomes of decisions and whether it has an effect on people’s trust in government. The first we can see in individual decisions; the second will be a long term goal affected by national and international events as well as those we can control at the local level. It raises some interesting questions: will the chance to participate in and of itself have meaning, or will it not matter at all, or perhaps be negative, if people participate but are unhappy with the final decision.

We have a little bit of evidence of success. A recent survey indicated that almost 70 percent of people with cable television have watched the City's TV channel, up from 58 percent in 1999.\(^5\) Website page views have gone up from about 22,000 per month to 37,000 per month in the last year and a half. Civic participation has always been strong in Seattle, but we can see its growth through the use of e-mail. Certain issues (most notably anything involving pets) draw very wide participation from people who don’t necessarily get involved in civic affairs. Our weekly polls are not a scientific measure of public opinion, but are a useful measure of interest in the issue.

Seattle has some unique political and cultural characteristics that support our initiative. We are well known for clean and open government. City-elected officials have always encouraged citizen participation – Seattle is infamous for its extensive and sometimes never ending public process. But only a limited number of people will spend endless hours at community meetings and public hearings, and our Mayor and City Council members want to hear from a wider variety of people. There is a particular concern to be inclusive of those who rarely participate: youth, non-native English speakers, and others who feel disenfranchised from the process or simply do not have the time to become educated and attend meetings.

It helps that our local elections are non-partisan, but all of our elected officials are aligned with the same political party. Nevertheless, while political differences are not great, there is competition for attention between elected officials. Staff have to be very careful to balance the coverage of the Mayor and City Council members. We have managed to do a reasonably good job at this, but it has not been without difficulties. There have been occasional challenges from individual council members and citizens about how a subject has been covered (or who has been covered).

There are many other challenges, not the least of which is resources. Our entire television annual budget would produce one hour of commercial TV. We were able to implement phase one of this project using some extra money that the City received from a cable television fee, but the City’s current budget shortfall has delayed our ability to move forward with additional improvements. It continues to amaze us how many people watch the channel or visit the website as we have no marketing budget; the majority of viewers find programs on the channel by surfing, and on the website through links to seattle.gov, which is heavily used.

\(^5\) Approximately 65 percent of Seattle households have cable TV
Another challenge is to figure out how to make the coverage of decision-making events more interactive. While we have some ability to reference material posted on the web during TV broadcasts, and to refer people on the web to videos, we need to do much more to enhance meeting coverage. We can provide better visuals, more context, and more opportunities for interactive discussions.

We also have to continue to find creative ways to let people know what we are doing and how they can be involved. Somewhat ironically, our biggest fans are those same people who have always been involved; they tape our programs and give us feedback on the issue coverage on our website. We have developed some partnerships with local media and with the sponsors of civic events that help us get the word out, but we must do much more to expand awareness and involvement.