

E-Participation and the Future of Democracy

All the ills of democracy can be cured by more democracy

Alfred E. Smith

Introduction

Among the 'ills of our democracy', to use Smith's language from nearly a century ago, are frequently cited low voting figures at elections, a decreasing trust in authority, an increasing tendency to 'bowl alone', and a growing diversity of values leading towards a declining sense of common citizenship. All of these are compounded by the need to engage with a world of increasing complexity and uncertainty.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the contribution that modern information and communications technology can make to address these ills. It is unapologetic in advocating the use of a technology that has the potential to transform the political world as dramatically as the invention of the printing press a thousand years ago; equally, it is realistic in recognising that technology will never be more than part of the answer.

The computer is already transforming the way we work and play. If it can enable us to stay in constant touch with colleagues around the world, to buy the holiday we want or the stationery our office needs, then we can also use it to strengthen our systems of government. If we can benefit from being wired customers, then why should we not benefit from being wired citizens? And why should government not benefit from having a better understanding of what citizens expect from it?

This paper aims to provide:

- A swift **overview** of what is variously called e-government and e-democracy for those who are new to this territory.
- An account of the **evolving relationships** between government and citizens being brokered by the new technology – gathered, significantly, mostly from other parts of the world.
- An outline of some basic standards for **e-participation** and **e-consultation** if they are to reach their full potential.

It concludes with some key measures that would demonstrate government's willingness to embrace this new world.

There are two points that need to be made about the sources and authorship of this paper. First, little of it is original: there are now innumerable websites devoted to the subjects discussed here; some of the most useful or interesting are listed at the end. Secondly, Dialogue by Design has a vested interest in electronic participation and consultation: it is our purpose and our business. We have drawn on our experience while trying, at the same time, to offer a detached account of how we see this field.

Overview of e-government and e-democracy

First, some definitions. E-government is used here to mean voting or using public services via the Internet; e-democracy covers the use of computers to enhance the democratic process.

Under the heading of e-government are the core services of central and local government. It should be possible to order a new passport or driving licence or any other standard service on-line; this is so basic as to be hardly worth mentioning. It is even beginning to happen in less developed countries (visit www.indianexpress.com/full_story.php?content_id=17805).

Electronic voting in national and local elections may be more problematic, but if it is possible to do the weekly shop online securely then it should be possible to work out a way of enabling us to vote securely. The impact on voting levels may be significant or not; the limited research to date suggests that it may encourage some people to vote.

As regards e-democracy, the critical question is whether the ability to provide and receive information electronically, and to interact with government and other citizens electronically, can strengthen or even re-invent democratic processes. There are a number of aspects to this, and there is also an important link back to e-government and public services provided electronically.

Information provision, for example, can take many forms. Some local community websites are already an invaluable source of information and a way to express opinions on local needs and priorities. They could easily be extended further and links could be created to local council and national government sites, or even international sites, so that it becomes possible to understand local issues in a broader context and the impact of national or international decisions on them. This is also perhaps the only way in which the global importance of subjects such as sustainable development will be appreciated at local level. Equally, the Internet enables communities of common interest, such as health provision, as well as common location, to generate debate, dialogue and wider links. It is only a step further to see value in both geographical communities and communities of common interest being better connected at national and international levels, with much more information both provided and received. The ramifications of this are considered further in the next section.

Another aspect of e-democracy is the way the Internet could affect the roles of political parties and pressure groups. At the moment they are using the Internet as essentially another means of providing information. The first membership organisations to exploit the real power and potential of the Internet will have a head start over their competitors – just as in the commercial world. For a real insight into how the Internet can affect the political process, South Korea is the place to go: study the role of OhmyNews.com during the recent presidential elections. Ironically, it may be our political leaders' somewhat amateurish approach to the Internet that provides space for the real meat of e-democracy, which is the role of the individual citizen. It may be that the technology is the vital catalyst that moves us towards a more participative and therefore sustainable democracy for citizens both wired - and unwired.

The advent of the Internet means that all organisations, including government, can treat citizens as individuals in the same way that successful businesses treat customers as individuals. Not only can citizens be provided with public services on an individual basis, but the opinions of individuals in relation to such services can be collected, acknowledged and responded to. Every opinion poll shows that it is public services that most exercise voters, and therefore if one is looking for an arena from which to begin to strengthen democracy, it would make sense to start by giving people more say, more frequently, in the provision of public services. The opposite is also true: the failure to involve people in how their money is used will lead to a progressive de-legitimising of public services. This is where the parallel worlds of e-democracy and e-government need to become thoroughly intertwined, with each serving and strengthening the other.

So the currency of democracy could shift from occasional voting to the ebb and flow of opinion as the technology enables a different relationship between government and citizen. It is arguable that most of the ills of democracy boil down to the individual's belief that he or she is given no real voice, so has no influence, does not feel important, and equally therefore feels responsibility for little beyond hearth and home. As Ralph Nader, the environmental activist, has said, 'There can be no daily democracy without daily citizenship'. Suddenly the idea of 'daily democracy' is becoming realisable. Whether or not people will value and use it, if it is available, can best be tested by trying it. If a doctor can be elected to Parliament on the single issue of local health provision, as happened at the last general election, then it suggests that people will welcome other opportunities to influence what their taxes are used to provide.

There are two further aspects of both e-democracy and e-government that deserve mention. The first is the provision of the physical, political and electronic architecture that underpins it all and allows everyone - individuals, communities, government, business - to communicate as and how we wish, and with whom we wish. This infrastructure is physical in the sense that the wires need to be in the right places and we must no longer tolerate exclusiveness imposed by pricing or geography, such as the current lamentable failure to make broadband available in all areas; the first battle cry of e-democracy is liable to be 'no representation without e-communication'. (It is slightly shattering that while about 5% of the British population have a broadband connection, the equivalent figure for South Korea is 70%.)

It is political because it rests on the willingness and enthusiasm of Parliament, executive and institutions of all kinds to accept and welcome contributions to their thinking and action from outside their normal bounds. The electronic refers to the need for technologies both simple enough and powerful enough to manage an explosion of use. It is too soon to know all the forms these technologies will finally take. The computer and Internet we have; digital television offers possibilities for those who would never use a computer; the mobile, personal telephone and the digital organiser may offer opportunities still to be imagined. And there will always be those who prefer to communicate by letter or fax, so scanning technology that renders equal the written and electronic word will also be needed.

None of this can be discussed, however, without mention of the 'digital divide' and the 'have-nets' and 'have-nots'. This is a problem that familiarity and generational change will eventually do much to solve, but any form of potential disenfranchisement must stay on the agenda as a source of concern and a prompt to action.

There is another final aspect to it all that should never be overlooked. Neither computer nor television compare with Orwell's all-seeing, all-knowing telescreen - not least because both can be switched off - but we should never entirely forget that the technology could be as much a threat to our freedoms as a buttress of them. Eternal vigilance coupled with rigorous data protection measures must become a given: but let us here, for the sake of argument, assume that we can protect ourselves and that we should not allow fear to stifle opportunity.

Evolving relationships between government and citizens

This section builds on the idea above that this new technology makes it possible for every individual citizen to convey his or her views on any aspect of policy to government. This is not, it must be emphasised, a naïve call for endless referenda and push-button voting on the results. That no more signals the re-invention of democracy than do the voting figures for *Pop Idol*.

It means using the technology to strengthen the existing relationships within our parliamentary democracy and to create new ones. We can use the technology, for example, to help MPs become ever more effective channels of communication among citizens, legislators and executive and to draw on and reflect the opinions of the people who elect them. For an example of how a website can be used to reconnect people and politicians, visit www.mail-archive.com/do-wire@tc.umn.edu/msg00274.html; or, if you speak Japanese visit www.kantei.go.jp, the Japanese Prime Minister's website. It has over 2 million subscribers.

Information is one of the raw materials of politics. The business of government at every level, from parish to Parliament, needs to be announced in a way that makes it accessible to anyone interested. With the announcements should be posted agendas, background information, supporting documents, links to relevant websites, summaries of relevant legislation, budget projections. With this should be information about exactly who will be taking decisions about what - whether elected representatives or appointed officials - and how they can be contacted. In fact, it should be possible for such announcements and attachments to be sent automatically to anyone who requests them. It's beginning to happen in a small way and in selected areas: visit www.newham.org.uk, www.think-net.org or www.citizenonline.co.uk for some examples of what is going on, and of course there is the invaluable www.ePolitix.com, but a visit to

www.govdocs.com/servlet/GovDocs/go?code=STPAUL_CityCouncil demonstrates even more clearly what could become universal.

It need not stop with announcements and publications. There is no inherent reason why every committee meeting in every village hall should not be available live or recorded on the Internet; visit www.house.leg.state.mn.us/htv/archivesHTV.asp for an example of such a system. Whether or not this is really desirable is another question: but it is time to at least debate it. The mere fact of providing such opportunities, however much or little they are used, would do something to strengthen the connection between governors and governed.

Information alone, however, does not alter relationships or power-balances; again, more important is the nature of the relationship between government and citizen that the new technology allows. This is not just about opportunities for participation and consultation, which are considered further in a moment; it touches upon the whole attitude of government to citizens.

For example, it has already been mentioned that it should be possible to transact electronically anything we currently do by post or over the counter. More important than the conveniences of electronic transactions, however, is the spirit in which they are conducted. We have to move beyond the consumerist idea of the citizen going as supplicant to government towards the ideal of government seeking every opportunity to serve the citizens whose taxes maintain it.

The technology makes it possible for government to know what its citizens want from it, and respond to those wants without further prompting. As Steven Clift, one of the most influential of commentators on e-democracy, says among much else of essential good sense at <http://e-democracy.org/do>:

“If someone wants a business license or permit where you live or if the government plans to take action on an issue you have indicated an interest in, you will be actively notified via e-mail based on your preferences. *Personalization with notification will be the measure of a truly wired democracy.* [Emphasis added].”

If you think this is unattainable fantasy, visit <http://www.betasite.dk/vores-kommuneuk/Default.asp?SideID=3&ID2=3>.

This brings us to the role of technology in making possible large-scale participation in policy-making – perhaps the single most exciting possibility presented by the new technology.

Electronic participation and consultation

Let's stay with Steven Clift for a moment:

“Why e-democracy? I want to help people build democracies where every citizen who wants to improve the world around them and be heard on important public issues can participate in public life with freedom and the right to act on their sense of public responsibility. I see a vast democratic divide, much larger than the digital divide, where the scarcity of time and attention is eroding the fabric of civil society and undermining the legitimacy of government. It is essential that we create new channels of representative democracy, enabled by information and communication technologies, that encourage effective “on your own time” participation as legitimate complement to in-person, often time discriminatory forms of political participation.”

More does not inevitably mean better. The active participation of numerous citizen stakeholders in policy-making does not guarantee that the policies that emerge will necessarily be different, or better, than those that might be prepared by half a dozen civil servants in Whitehall. But it is a fair bet that the continuing *non*-involvement of stakeholders

in policy-making will further erode the legitimacy and authority of the policies those civil servants, and their masters, are promulgating.

Until now it was possible to argue that the logistics of large-scale participation made it too costly and impractical to be realistic. That argument is no longer valid. It is therefore encouraging to have watched a number of experiments in electronic participation and consultation, over the past three years, begin to map out what is possible and how to go about it. Some of the conclusions will be set out in a moment. Overall, though, the current state of electronic consultation and participation in the United Kingdom can best be described as variable.

For a snapshot, visit the 10 Downing Street website and the participative processes it advertises. The various ones on sustainable development seem to have attracted a small number of mainly the same people, with the majority of submissions coming from two or three participants. They also seem to act as a vehicle for statements from various government ministers or other government departments. The other consultation, on crime reduction, can only be read by registered participants, with the impression being that one has to meet certain – unspecified – criteria in order to be accepted. Visit CitizenSpace, billed as the branch of UK online where one is invited to “take part in policy-making”, and you will find a list of consultations to which you are invited to respond by e-mail. Or you can of course go to their forums to “discuss new policy proposals and influence government decision-making”. The most recent forum closed in November last year: so hardly a superhighway into the heart of Whitehall.

There have been other more promising experiences. For example, some of the participants in a recent Hansard Society consultation on Domestic Violence, originally convened to help the Parliamentary All-Party Domestic Violence Group, developed their own website to continue the support and community fostered by the consultation process. A forum such as this, encouraging people with common interests to build an electronic network, is turning consultation into an act of community. This is also the point at which to mention Dialogue by Design’s (www.dialoguebydesign.com) experience of using iterative and tightly structured templates integrated with sophisticated data management software as an alternative to the moderated forum approach used by the Hansard Society. The use of facilitators to collate and structure submissions before they are put back on the website enables participants to see and compare ranges of opinion, to influence and be influenced – and to reflect on the views of others before participating in subsequent sessions. From the host’s point of view it also enables very rapid summaries of discussion and responses to participants.

An electronic consultation process managed by Dialogue by Design was recently used as a case study in the Audit Commission report *Connecting with Users and Citizens* (www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports). Work on e-government for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the report says,

“showed that members of the public are willing and able to participate in well-structured discussion using internet facilities, even where the topic is complex.... In particular, information was obtained from everyone taking part, not just the more vocal or visible. Information could also be fed back to people who had contributed, encouraging their sense of ownership of the process and making it clear that the information they supplied was being used.”

For a useful overview of the forums approach (though not of the template approach) and a general discussion of progress in the field, *Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation* by Stephen Coleman and John Gøtze is available from the Hansard Society. They make the following key points:

“Anyone studying the experience so far of online public engagement in policy-making will come up against three unavoidable truths:

1. There are very few examples in any country of the Internet being used to involve citizens in policy deliberation.

2. Where examples can be found, they are of an experimental nature; online public participation is still in its infancy.
3. Almost all of the cases one finds are frustrated by the same two problems:
 - too few people know about them;
 - governments fail to integrate them into the policy process or respond to them effectively.”

These are the points that have to be addressed as a priority, and the following paragraphs attempt to do this as well as to set out some of the minimum requirements for meaningful electronic consultation and participation. The recommendations here are based on long experience in both face-to-face and electronic consultation and participation processes. They are grouped under four key headings: *numbers*, *accessibility*, *interactivity*, and *effect*.

A. *Numbers*

The first quality standard is around the *number* of people participating. Half a dozen people clicking on a website or even a couple of dozen dropping in to a forum from time to time does not make the grade: we have to think immediately in terms of hundreds, and, within a year or two, thousands.

The purpose of having large numbers is not representativeness. A small group, provided it is properly weighted, can be just as representative as a group many times the size. No, the reason for involving more people is to enable more people to be valued in their own right as individuals – not as representatives. It is about giving more people a voice, the chance to be heard, to know that their contributions have been recorded and respected. Larger numbers can also improve the process of social intelligence-gathering.

(If the process is to involve any form of meaningful vote, however, then additional effort must be made to ensure the participants do form a properly representative cross-section of opinion. These named individuals, moreover, must include the independent and unaffiliated so the process is not dominated by professional lobbyists and ‘the usual suspects’.)

The approach has to go beyond glorified opinion-polling: we are interested in people’s individual ideas judged on their merits – not in whether they are in a majority or minority.

So, *quality* here means:

1. Active invitations to named individuals describing the purpose of the process, how to make best use of it, how to see the results, and how the results will be used – *not* a blanket invitation by a round robin letter or through an announcement on a website.
2. Large numbers mean chatrooms and forums are liable to become very frustrating for participants and/or unmanageable for moderators. The answer is probably asynchronous participation using time windows. This means a process has to go live for 1-4 weeks to allow time for participation, the results then being processed over the following 1-2 weeks, and then 1-2 subsequent iterations to allow participants to see the results and make further contributions and complete an evaluation.

Involving large numbers also has implications for accessibility and interactivity.

B. *Accessibility*

Next, quality means making the process accessible in five ways.

1. People need access to the technology if the digital divide is not to turn into a democratic divide. This does not mean the government has to supply every participant with their own computer, but it does mean ensuring either that every participant is within walking distance of a public building where they can use a computer, or that they can go to a meeting or be visited by someone who can enable them to participate by bringing the technology with them. It also means integrating different technologies so that the

opinions of those who choose to participate by letter, or fax or even by phone can be included in the one single database. And of course it means working with organisations representing people with different abilities and languages to ensure that the technology and the process themselves should never be a barrier to participation.

2. The second aspect of accessibility is to provide background information in forms that people can readily absorb: short summaries, links to relevant websites, panellists, video. It means politics made punchy: issues that matter to people in language that they can understand. Yes, of course there is the risk of dumbing-down and populism: but the alternative, the death of interest in serious issues, may be even more of a threat.
3. There is also the question of people's accessibility to each other's opinions during the process. They need to be able to see what others have contributed, to understand others' perceptions of the same issue, to learn from each other. This means that their input has to be managed into a database in a way that allows them to find comments on the subjects that interest them quickly and easily. It may be that very few people, except for the database managers and the sponsors, will in practice read every comment by every person if several thousand people have participated, but it should be possible to do so. Anyway, if it is in a form accessible for the sponsors then it can as easily be made accessible for the participants.
4. Accessibility means participants will need to be supported, at least in the early days, with comprehensive information and technical helplines.
5. Finally, once participants are registered and involved in a process, they need to be reminded to stay involved through e-mail updates, summaries of interesting points being made, and sometimes provocations from the process sponsors. Accessibility is about maintaining motivation as well as providing the wherewithal.

C. Interactivity

Currently, responding to a government consultation feels like watching one's efforts disappear into a black hole. Getting the feedback loop right is probably the single most important aspect of all participation, both electronic and conventional. If e-participation and consultation are to be valued, participants must receive at least initial responses from government within a week or two of a process ending. This feedback need not be final and it need not be perfect: but it must happen almost immediately, and it must demonstrate that a person's participation has been appreciated and is being taken seriously. It is ultimately the quality of the interactivity that will determine whether that person bothers to return.

So the singular ability of the Internet to reach large numbers of people must be integrated with a sophisticated database system that allows large volumes of material to be organised, referenced, interrogated and presented in a form that makes the material easily useable by those who have to do the responding.

Who should do the responding? Which says more: a bland acknowledgment from a junior civil servant six months on or a sharp, relevant response from a Secretary of State to participants within 48 hours of a process ending? If you doubt the practicality of this, visit the Netherlands to see an ongoing discussion with Minister Roger van Boxtel (<http://www.rogervanboxtel.nl>) facilitated by the Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek, (Dutch Centre for Civic Education). This has established a clear response mechanism and time frame, with the facilitators having guaranteed access to the Minister to develop responses on controversial issues.

Interactivity is not just about responses from government. It should start from the way the whole process is set up. Participants should be involved in setting the agenda; they should be able to challenge the way their submissions are used; they should be able to respond, in turn, to the Secretary of State who responds to them. This would be desirable anyway; as

with all technology, the possibility of doing something valuable brings with it the responsibility either to do it, or to explain why you are not doing it.

D. Effect

Finally, quality will be determined by perceived effect. Have all the words really made a difference? The technology enables all those thousands of participants to be told, quickly, the effect their participation has had. If they feel effective, they will return and participate again. The quality standards here are:

1. For any form of participation or consultation to be effective it must have a clearly defined and specific purpose. It may be an impending decision; a set of priorities to be clarified; or a document to be revised and improved. The more specific the purpose, the more likely people are to be interested in participating and the less the process looks as if it is paying lip service to the idea of involving people.

This is why every process will be different: designed to meet a specific purpose, involving particular people. There can be no such thing as a standard, off-the-shelf process if it is to be effective, though costs and practicality demand a relatively limited set of templates to be tweaked and tailored rather than re-invented for each use.

2. Effectiveness also means it must be possible for people to track government thinking and decision-making from the moment it is conceived, through the consultation process, through the parliamentary process, to the point where it emerges to affect our lives. Only by doing this can there be real transparency and accountability. It may mean turning upside down some precious and privileged assumptions about how the wheels of government should turn and who should see them turning: but this is the price of more democracy.
3. Each process will also need to be carefully evaluated: who participated, why, how easy did they find it, how effective did they feel their participation was, and so on.

Conclusion

New technology has always re-made the existing world: sometimes with violence, always with confusion, uncertainty and dislocation. This new technology has arrived so quickly that governments can legitimately say that until now they have not realised its true potential. That excuse is no longer tenable and, to be fair, is no longer being made. The Leader of the House of Commons, Rt Hon Robin Cook MP, implicitly acknowledged this recently:

“There is a connection waiting to be made between the decline in democratic participation and the explosion in new ways of communicating. We need not accept the paradox that gives us more ways than ever to speak, and leaves the public with a wider feeling than ever before that their voices are not being heard. The new technologies can strengthen our democracy, by giving us greater opportunities than ever before for better transparency and a more responsive relationship between government and electors.”

We started by looking at the ills of democracy and the various dimensions of e-government and e-democracy, then at how the new technology may affect relationships between government and citizens, and finally at the specifics of developing electronic participation and consultation.

To take this agenda forward we now need government to do three things:

1. Modernise its whole attitude and approach to the way citizens inform and influence the development of policy, thereby providing a clear and structured context for the use of new technology.

2. Recognise the full potential of the Internet and begin vigorous, serious and sustained experiments in different ways to use it, establishing standards and benchmarks, reliable providers, and firm indicators of the costs and resources required.
3. Communicate the results of such experimentation across government so that each department becomes aware of the options open to it and the merits of different approaches.

This will require a seismic shift in the scale of government ambitions. It's not enough, as the Prime Minister has said, to see this country in the forefront of e-commerce; we have always been more than a nation of shopkeepers. It's time to make a place for ourselves at the forefront of modern democracy.

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www.dialoguebydesign.com

The following websites and publications provide a sample of the activity in this field:

Dialogue by Design	http://www.dialoguebydesign.com/
Hansard Society	http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/
Oxford Internet Institute	http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/
International Teledemocracy Centre	http://itc.napier.ac.uk/
Community Informatics Research & Applications Unit	http://www.cira.org.uk/
IST e-democracy cluster	http://www.cordis.lu/united_kingdom
Centre for Democracy and Technology	www.cdt.org
Multimedia Victoria	http://www.mmv.vic.gov.au/
National Center for Digital Government	http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/digitalcenter
Publicus.net	http://www.publicus.net/
UK online	http://www.ukonline.gov.uk/
Office of the e-envoy	http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/
European Commission – Your Voice	http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice
IPM: Interactive Policy Making	http://ipmmarket.homestead.com/
OECD Public Management Programme	http://webnet1.oecd.org/EN/home
Commonwealth Centre for Electronic Governance	http://www.electronicgov.net/
E-government bulletin	http://www.headstar.com/egb
Virtual Society	http://virtualsociety.sbs.ox.ac.uk/
EVE (Evaluating Practices and Validating Technologies in E-Democracy)	http://www.eve.cnrs.fr/
Electronic Democracy European Network	http://www.edentool.org/