



Engaged democracy in the network society:

Exploring the gap between e-government and social media

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Contents

Preface	2
Introduction	3
Technologies and the network society	5
Democracy, networks, and global-local tensions	9
Something is happening to democracy	12
E-government and e-democracy	15
Social media: 'it feels more democratic'	21
Concluding remarks	25
Sources	27

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Kevin Harris, February 2007

Preface

This essay emerged following an international seminar organised by the British Council in England in March 2006, which looked at the issues of empowerment and participation in the network society.



The event was designed to build on a previous seminar on social inclusion in the network society, seeking to explore the potential link between governance and empowerment in the use of the information and communication technologies.

Participants heard various presentations on the seminar themes, and themselves gave presentations describing developments and initiatives in their own countries – some with close appreciation of the nature of disempowerment, and views on strategies for increasing levels of participation. However, it was a struggle to demonstrate how such understanding underpins network society strategies at national or even local level. Further discussions after the seminar suggested that progress in this area is being held back by inadequate understanding of the issues. While several countries show evidence of rapid innovation and development in e-government applications, there is often only weak appreciation of the empowerment and exclusion issues that ought to be recognised alongside such advances.

The British Council therefore commissioned this essay as an exercise in conceptual ground-clearing and to stimulate thinking on the breadth of issues implied. It reviews understandings of the information / knowledge / network society and the debate about transforming democracy, uncovering the apparent parallel development of e-government and social media.

Introduction

The concept of the 'network society' holds a promise of higher levels of participation and empowerment, and hence more equal societies. Online and mobile technologies discourage emphatic hierarchical arrangements in organisations; the home and the corporation are more permeable than previously to ideas and information; the technologies extend access to a broad range of ideas and knowledge; they provide opportunities for creativity and the empowerment of individual expression. A range of alternative communication options, such as blogging and podcasting, seem to be helping us to become more connected with a broader range of people, ideas, and information.

We regard information and communication as the lifeblood of democracy, but more does not necessarily mean better. If information is power, why are people in positions of power often so ill-informed? Does a 'knowledge society' simply mean that more power goes to those who have privileged access to particular information? Freedom of information and data protection rights take us part of the way, but how do we ensure that a society characterised by intense and fluid communication is more participative, and its citizens more empowered?

Early experiments and much rhetoric suggest that we will begin to have more answerable authorities and more communicative citizens. Such transformations will not come about without strategic and concerted efforts on the part of civil society, public authorities and politicians. But our 2006 seminar and subsequent research suggests that much investment in the network society goes into devising smart (cost-saving) systems for various aspects of *passive* citizenship without contributing to the empowerment that *active* citizenship implies.

It may also be that we simply do not understand the processes whereby online technologies contribute to empowerment. There is weak appreciation of the potential for democratic transformation in the network society, perhaps because we are looking only for *direct* links between what we do with the technologies, and how we govern ourselves and are governed at present. Neither the technologies on the one hand, nor the processes of governance on the other, are discrete and self-contained: but sometimes we behave as if they are because in both cases their evolution is so unclear to us.

The benefits of technological applications in public service delivery are not in question. For example, with plenty of justification based on early experience, the World Bank claims the benefits of e-government as follows:

E-government can benefit citizens by reducing delays, consolidating multiple services under one roof, eliminating the need for frequent visits to government offices, and containing corruption. In addition, publishing rules and procedures online can increase transparency. Moreover, because poor people bear the largest costs of administrative inefficiency and corruption, delivering services through rural kiosks leads to their economic and social empowerment. (World Bank 2004)

But improved service delivery is not the same as democratic transformation. It is not the same as empowerment and participation in the network society. Indeed one might argue that over-emphasis on service delivery through e-government might even detract from progress in democratic transformation, by embedding inappropriate processes. In this essay I explore the mismatch between the service delivery mentality and the social dynamics of the network society. What we need to understand are the implications of new ways of doing things for a new form of democracy which already is being stimulated in other ways.



The next section refers to the technologies in question. Reflecting on some of the general terms we use to describe the historical sense of transformation, it considers the broad social changes that are anticipated as a close consequence of the widespread use of computer and online technologies.

Technologies and the network society

We know that the widespread use of powerful technologies can contribute significantly to the transformation of societies. For example, in a detailed historical study, Lynn White has described the significance of the invention of the stirrup:

Few inventions ... have had so catalytic an influence on history. The requirements of the new mode of warfare which it made possible found expression in a new form of western European society. (White 1962: 38)

More recently, the impact of the new information and communication technologies has often been compared, understandably, with the invention of printing. Historically, it could be argued that some of the information society hype has inflated the significance of these technologies by comparison with, say, the technology of the alphabet (Ong 1982). Nonetheless, the simple principle to which I want to draw attention is that if the *dominant* communication technology in any society changes, the ecology of that society is likely to change significantly. In this section I want to try and contextualise those changes.

With popular use of the internet little more than ten years old, it's still hard to distinguish clearly the features of the evolving network society. The term refers to the emerging social structure that characterises the post-industrial age.¹ Networks are of course an ancient human device and resource, but new technologies increase their number, power and potential significantly. Jan van Dijk, Manuel Castells and others have suggested that 'the network' as the distinguishing organisational feature of the foreseeable future, based partly on network infrastructures that exploit combinations of converging new technologies – wireless telecommunications, data processing, personal computing and so on. At the same time, in urban sociology, the work of Wellman and others has identified and explained a historical shift in interpersonal relations from neighbourhood groups to social networks and 'networked individualism,' a transformation partly intensified by the internet.²

For our present purposes, there are two key dimensions which are subject to influence by these technologies: the extent to which human beings can connect meaningfully with one another remotely; and the extent to which they can do so either synchronously or asynchronously. Neither dimension is specifically new, but in combination, and relatively inexpensively, they appear to offer particular power to citizens. As William Mitchell has pointed out, a fundamental effect of the new technologies has been to bring about a substantial, rapid increase in low-cost, remote asynchronous interaction. (Mitchell 1999: 138)

¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network_society

² See for example Wellman et al (2002).

What these technologies do is to help generate network capital, which was harder to do in the age of print. That is to say, they stimulate connections between people that can lead to social transactions – information-sharing, agreements, instrumental support, emotional support. (Harris 2003) From this perspective, the network society is fundamentally about relationships. Online and mobile technologies increase the range of possibilities for people to connect with others. They increase the possibilities for discovering commonality.

This is not to deny the significantly increased power to re-package and process *information* of various kinds: this is the characteristic of the technologies which underpins most uses of the term ‘information society’ and which has driven commercial and governmental economic interest to invest in it. Castells rightly points out that of course information has been critical in all societies, and this term does not give us an indication of the dominant forms of social organisation which characterise a given society. In discussing the use of these labels, he makes the point that the term “‘the network society’” ‘does not exhaust all the meaning of the “informational society.”’ (Castells 2000: 21n) I suggest that the reverse is also true.³

Since that was written, it has also become fashionable to refer to the ‘digital age,’ to ‘digital inclusion,’ ‘digital opportunity’ and so on. If all that is special about this age is the notion of our dominant communication media having a digital platform, then the best that can be said is that we might thereby avoid too much disappointment. Like the ubiquitous ‘e-’ prefix, the word ‘digital’ tells us little except that a lack of thought has gone into its use. It could even be argued that the perpetrators of such terminology are unwilling to examine the social implications of their subject. Both prefixes should remind us of the need to get away from an over-emphasis on the technologies.

These technologies offer to users a new level of *control* over their interactions, and may make *existing and established* social relations more open and flexible. The evolution of answer-phones, personal rather than location-specific phones, caller identification, voicemail, text messaging, email, satellite navigation and so on all contribute to the empowerment of the user. They enable us to some extent to avoid pressured responses, to select correspondents, to control who reaches us, when, and what we can access. One (perhaps inevitable) consequence is an increase in individual expectations of control and connection with others. In consumer-oriented societies, people have fought for the right to be acknowledged as individuals and to have some rights in their relations with authorities and not, for example, to be subjected to expensive and frustrating telephone queues. The institutional world – especially government and businesses providing utility services – struggles to keep this principle at bay. As Stephen Coleman has put it, ‘The state is remarkably insensitive in its encounters with citizens.’ (Coleman 2005a: 273)

³ It’s worth keeping in mind that, while Castells to a considerable extent popularised the term ‘network society,’ the overall title of his seminal trilogy is *The information age*, a term still widely used.

In spite of much emphasis on financial and commercial networks as the bases or drivers for the information society (however so-called) there were those such as William Martin who suggested from an early stage that 'there are clear grounds for arguing that it will be in the social and human sphere that the impact of the information and communication technologies will be most profound.' (Martin 1995: 130) Before long there were a number of initiatives trying to get at the social detail, as the potential and changes began to unfold. The INSINC working party, set up by IBM UK in the 1990s, emphasised the 'social' component and offered this definition of the information society in its 1997 report:

A society characterised by a high level of information intensity in the everyday life of most citizens, in most organisations and workplaces; by the use of common or compatible technology for a wide range of personal, social, educational and business activities; and by the ability to transmit, receive and exchange digital data rapidly between places irrespective of distance.

The report went on to describe a socially inclusive information society as one which will:

- (i) have ready, easy-to-use public and individual access to the communication channels without heavy dependence on private or public agencies as intermediaries;
- (ii) ensure that information which is essential for full participation in society, and for support in times of need, is available at no cost at the point of delivery;
- (iii) invest heavily in the information handling and communication skills of its citizens, raising their levels of information awareness, competence in discriminating when faced with large quantities of information, and ability to exploit information. (INSINC 1997: 9)⁴

It may be helpful to distinguish two dimensions to the 'inclusion' focus in the information society discourse, which we might call the macro and the micro. At the micro level, commentators are concerned with factors that might contribute to the exclusion of individuals or groups from the benefits implied in access to the technologies. Many of these factors also apply at the macro level, but here commentary is concerned to explore the potential for a *global* information society, and in particular the extent to which the benefits (and disadvantages) of globalisation are distributed unevenly.

Erik Davis in a colourful account published in 1999 reminds us of the association of these technologies with other globally influential phenomena:

The telecommunication and computer networks that envelop the earth are only the most hard-wired expression of what amounts, in the end, to a single planetary system blanketing Terra's multiple cultures and

⁴ Even in this definition the potential of the technologies to stimulate and support social networks was not anticipated. Social media, which I discuss in a later section, had not yet begun to feature in most analyses. It's also of interest that, in the second part of the definition, items (i) and (ii) are now typically the subject of e-government strategies and in many places have been fulfilled.

nations. Capitalism and communications have been shrinking the world for centuries, of course, but this new global space intertwines us as never before with its increasingly dynamic flows of capital, goods, immigrants, pollution, software, refugees, pop culture, viruses, weapons, ideas, and drugs. It is a world where warming trends spurred by industrial nations swallow islands in Polynesia, where governments pay more attention to CNN than to ambassadors, where a single bank clerk in Singapore can bring down a financial institution on the other side of the planet. (Davis 1999: 301)

It is the principle of equitable global development that drives the UN, in its e-government report (2005), to make the case for social inclusion in the information society. The UN is not the only agency to argue that excessive inequalities threaten global social progress and that these could be exacerbated as much as relieved through the widespread use of these technologies.

The potential of a global information society rests on equality of opportunity. (UN 2005: 2).

The UN also makes the case for what it calls 'e-participation' and access, as preconditions for that inclusion. The UN's e-participation index assesses the relevance and usefulness of 'the e-participation features of government websites,' and how well they are deployed by the governments for promoting participatory decision making. (UN 2005: 93) Unsurprisingly, the index suggests that those economies that are most developed in terms of e-government are also 'in the vanguard of providing access and opportunity to the citizen through development of participatory initiatives via ICT.' All the more reason, I suggest, why there should be close attention paid to the nature of democratic change and the contribution of e-government systems to democratic ends.



In the next section I use three related issues emerging in the network society to raise some questions which put the notion of engaged democracy into context.

Democracy, networks, and global-local tensions

In this essay I set out to raise some questions about the relation between our uses of new communication technologies, and the emergence of some as-yet unclear new form of democracy. This section comprises a brief outline of three issues which I think represent different angles on the same phenomenon. Each points to an emerging situation which raises some questions.

Emerging situation

Democracy is changing. The old tensions between representative and participative democracy are either (depending on your position) intractable, weakening, or increasingly irrelevant. There are calls for democratic systems to become more deliberative and 'conversational' and to engage more with citizens. The language shift from 'government' to 'governance' implies that more is expected in the citizen's relationship to authority than just service delivery, voting, and the tracing of accountability. Democracy is about relationships as much as it is about formal processes. It is about dialogue as much as decision.

The network society implies a more information-intensive and communication-intensive context for everyday life as well as for the conduct of private and public business. An increasing proportion of our time is spent sharing, receiving, and interpreting information. Networks, rather than hierarchies, increasingly characterise the contexts in which much of this exchange takes place.

Climate change has begun to strengthen a global sense of collective responsibility, which ties-in other collective values (such as pluralism, respect, and social justice). Collective environmental concern has been at the forefront of the re-emergence of communities of interest, serving to expose weaknesses in our democratic systems. This strengthening sense of being global confirms, and is confirmed by, the connectedness that the internet affords, thus increasing the

Questions

What is the contribution of online technologies in general, and social media in particular, to this transformation? Is the transformation somehow a consequence of the widespread use of certain technologies that promote horizontal relationships? If there is a contribution, in what ways is it positive and in what ways negative?

Will this society be more participative and less unequal? Will a higher proportion of people feel more empowered? Do we have to take steps to ensure that such values are embedded, or are they implicit?

Does this crisis erode the importance of the local? For many citizens around the world, the sense is increasing that our lives are affected by forces beyond our influence – extreme weather, war, and economic vulnerability being three obvious examples. As political representatives struggle to help people deal

pressure on hierarchical power structures which operate to narrow people's perspectives.

with this, and more and more information is transferred through the technologies of remote communication, do local issues lose out in the competition for attention?

These themes all point to what I regard as a fundamental issue of our time, which is the shifting understanding of 'community' in relation to the individual, and the ways in which we experience difference. How has the practice of collective environmental responsibility gradually gathered momentum? Why is the impetus for community engagement suddenly so widely accepted, even urgent? If the principles of collective involvement and commitment are enjoying a revival against individualism, does the policy emphasis on cohesion (national, ethnic, faith-based, local, or whatever) imply as a consequence increased rejection of the identifiable Other? ('We' associate because we have something in common: 'they' are different and may be a threat to us).

Approaches that attempt to shore-up an outmoded democratic model by strengthening the normative centre may be missing the mark. As Barbara Arneil argues, a robust civic culture 'can also represent a powerfully constraining, disciplining or exclusionary force for those groups of people who deviate from the given norms, along religious, ethnic, cultural or gendered lines.' (Arneil 2006: 39)

Arneil explains the perceived decline of social capital in the USA from a historical 'golden age' of associational life in the first half of the twentieth century, in terms of a transition 'from acceptance of the status quo to dissent.' (Arneil 2006: 237) She clarifies the tensions between establishing social justice for cultural minorities, and asserting consistent nation-wide cohesion around established norms. These tensions are the tensions of a civilisation coming to terms with diversity, and the dominant culture having to adjust as multicultural justice becomes asserted over policies of assimilation. In part they are played out, I suggest, in sometimes radical affirmations of collective rights and solidarity, as for example in opposition to the Iraq war, or in social justice for indigenous groups, or simply in the mobilisation of local people in campaigns. From cumulative objections to gated communities and the gradual social-outcasting of SUV owners, through international initiatives such as a synchronised blackout,⁵ collective association has a new momentum, encouraged by the global reach of technologies, individualism may be in

⁵ In January 2007 an email was in wide circulation encouraging people as follows: 'Thursday 1, February: if you feel concerned about the global warming and all the problems of environment and ecology: switch off all your lights from 7.55 p.m to 8 p.m, local time. It is a symbol to show how numerous we are to feel concerned about those problems. This date was chosen because UNO will end a report on the climate in France this day.'

retreat, and conventional traditional politics is becoming impossible in this context.



It seems that democracy is under pressure in the network society, but it's not yet clear what that pressure implies. In the next section I explore more closely the kinds of broad change that are becoming apparent and which suggest a more engaged form of democracy.

Something is happening to democracy

Democracy in many developed countries seems to have been in a poor state of health for some time now. Various analysts have identified disconcerting symptoms. Stephen Coleman for instance has observed that ‘the withdrawal of the public from the auditorium of democratic politics is a striking global trend, both in established and new democracies.’ (Coleman 2005b: 1)

Lawrence Pratchett, in a contribution to the European e-agora project, lists the following issues:

- Declining turnout at local elections, from an already low base.
 - Dissatisfaction with local politics and mistrust of politicians.
 - Growing recognition of the gap between those who are economically and politically involved in their communities and those who feel excluded.
 - The recognition of a generational shift in political behaviour and the growing problem of engaging young people in traditional politics.
 - The limited capacity for action facing local government in the context of increasing central control in key policy areas, global economic and social pressures and the complexities of local governance structures.
- (Adapted from Pratchett 2006: 320-321)

In terms of explanations for these symptoms, Coleman has identified two main drivers for some politicians’ urge to reconnect with their public: the demise of duty-driven political participation, and the decline of constructions of identity and citizenship which are ‘simply obligatory and instrumental.’ (Coleman 2005a: 273)

In the UK context, the reassessment of democratic processes is associated with the movement to modernise government generally and local government in particular. Back in 1999 the Foundation for IT in Local Government (FITLOG) offered an astute assessment of the changing UK local government agenda which identified:

A new centre of gravity for governance which it is now suggested should be shifted towards the citizen and grassroots community, so that governance is based not just in the state bureaucracy or the private competitive market, but also in civil society and *its informal networks*. (FITLOG 1999: 6, emphasis added).

The shifting complexity of contemporary local government in western countries has come to be illustrated by increasing layers of *multi-level governance*, described by Schmitter and Trechsel in their Council of Europe green paper as a “blurred” political space. (Schmitter & Trechsel 2004: 5) Combinations of national and local funding, with mixed (and sometimes confused) responsibilities for official roles on themes such as safety, transport, health, planning, and adult learning, characterise this new culture of partnership decision-making and practice. ‘Representative’ local citizens are expected to have a role in these partnerships, and one consequence is that the formal practice of democracy begins to look slightly different everywhere.

It is inevitable that there will be teething difficulties when local councils host or manage externally-funded, or partially-funded partnerships. Multiple partnership engagement can be time- and resource-consuming, with the results much less predictable than under previous regimes. In the mechanistic orientation of service delivery, partnership is often treated as a structure rather than an activity. (Skidmore 2004: 97)

At the same time we can identify a general trend for twenty-first century democratic governments to become more and more demanding of citizens, and increasingly keen to do less themselves. The 'responsibilisation' of citizens (Herbert 2005) through community engagement is one very visible feature of this development. The discourse here is about the moral responsibility of citizens, and the extent to which policy can influence behaviour. This seems to be a further, related trend away from instrumental service-orientation in governance.

Democracy is about relationships. If too many are dysfunctional, it won't work. Increasingly, concerns are being expressed about the mismatch between people's experience of democracy and its ideals. The UK government has attempted to link democracy and community engagement together in its recent local government white paper. (DCLG 2006) This initiative carries an implicit acknowledgement that democracy is no longer predominantly about formal processes, universally accepted procedures, stable forums using replicable formats and congregational spaces. From now on it will be more about local variations, different options for accountability, relationships and conversations. It will depend heavily on how those involved engage with one another.

Stephen Coleman has described the circumstances for this transformation as follows:

the old terms of exchange, while never satisfactory, have become increasingly unacceptable. As people have become less deferential, as society has become more diverse, and as new means of two-way communication have developed, so citizens are coming to demand a less distant, more direct, conversational form of representation. (Coleman 2005b: 9)

Geoff Mulgan has also taken up the theme of 'democracy as conversation' in his book on government and power:

Most of the day to day business of contemporary government is closer to monologue... The challenge for democracies is whether they can bring more of that vernacular conversation into their deliberations. (Mulgan 2006: 235-236)

And elsewhere, Tom Bentley calls for the stimulation of more 'everyday democracy' by developing the local roots of democratic self-governance, for example through making 'co-production by citizens as important as professional knowledge and performance management.' (Bentley 2005: 55)

Just a minute: 'co-production by citizens'? This might mean that when a significant planning decision is taken, say, or some action is taken around health or housing or care policy, then the decision or the action taken, and the information processed as part of that decision or action, has been co-produced by citizens. Reflecting on this helps us to appreciate clearly that thinking about democracy is changing. The point is that much of the everyday democracy that already takes place, through community action and participation for example, is insufficiently recognised as contributing to the democratic culture.⁶ This helps explain why engagement and participation remain unrecognised as being essential features in engaged democracy within the network society. As Bryant and Wilcox note:

There is lots of participation and involvement going on, it's just that most of it is DIY activity taking place a long way away from the calcified environment of formal participation and consultation projects. (Bryant and Wilcox 2006)

Where then, I want to ask, is the analysis of the new forms of democratic governance in the network society?



In the next section I explore the apparent distinction and gap between e-government systems and new forms of democratic governance.

⁶ I accept that many community organisations are not procedurally democratic and do not set out to be. But in most cases their significance as sites of involvement and engagement, where views are presented, challenged and revised, is crucial, providing a context and 'sandpit' for learning and practising participative behaviour - particularly when many societies provide very little other infrastructure to promote a 'habit' or routine experience of participation.

e-government and e-democracy

At times over the past ten years the compulsion to preface with the letter 'e' any human activity to which the technologies can contribute has seemed exaggerated to the point of being laughable.⁷ The dangers are obvious: by over-emphasising the significance of the technologies, we risk obscuring, oversimplifying or devaluing human involvement and interaction (for example in a complex field like democracy); and any exercise can come to look like a cumbersome marketing device to disguise flawed services or reduced investment (for example in the delivery of government services).

These are widespread impressions which practice has failed to dispel. In this section I want to reflect on some of the features of the e-government 'industry' in order to highlight the contrast with the features of democracy generally and, subsequently, the uses of social media.

As early as 2000, one international report on e-government policy commented:

Too many governments are looking for short-term savings from automation, rather than longer term gains from re-engineering. We need a cost/benefit model that tries to capture the citizens' experience of better government – issues like increased trust or improved life chances – as well as the cost of e-government. (Oakley 2000: 3)

And more recently, criticism has been levelled at the orientation of e-democracy projects:

Current e-democracy models are largely based on traditional thinking... On the whole the impact on the cultural and organisational problems of participation is minimal. In common with the majority of e-government projects, this work is based on the idea that government can construct an online 'place' that reflects its own view of the issues, and then invite 'communities' to visit and 'join in the debate'. However, the real debate and the real action are elsewhere – within people's own networks. (Bryant and Wilcox 2006)

The problem of de-emphasising the scintillating newness of electronic media is recognised in the work of the new International Centre of Excellence for Local E-democracy. ICELE is determined to stress a less pioneering, more supportive role for e-democracy, which it describes in these terms:

It complements traditional methods of community engagement such as public meetings and workshops so therefore it should not be viewed as a different model of democratic governance. Rather its aim is to:

⁷ I have yet to see the notion of e-electronics put forward, but perhaps it's only a matter of time, (or 'e-history'). Steve Woolgar has described this phenomenon with reference to the word 'virtual' as an epithet which is 'applied to various existing activities and social institutions. Examples of epithetized activities are learning, working, mail, shopping, commuting, banking, governance, medicine, and sex. Examples of epithetized institutions include education, community, society, organization, medicine, government, university, reality, media, and social science.' (Woolgar 2002: 3)

- Enhance community outcomes
- Build capacity and skills
- Encourage participation from communities and groups who are not currently actively engaged in government processes
- Helps communities engage with each other
- Enables two way consultation and exchange of views
- Promotes information sharing.⁸

Given that in many countries now there are various experimental projects and programmes seeking to understand how the use of the technologies can 'change the relationship between citizens and government,' ICELE is interested in how e-democracy 'supplements representative, participatory and direct democracy.'⁹

This reflects and is reflected in some tiny signs that the promotion of e-government and e-governance has begun to offer a more measured assessment of what it is really trying to do. For example, a World Bank Joint Economic Research Program seminar in Kazakhstan in 2006 offered this among its bullet point conclusions:

E-Governance is about governance, not about “e”. IT should follow and enable changes in administrative functions and process re-engineering – there has to be very close interaction between IT and the reform of governance itself. The driver for any administrative reform needs to be the desire for clearly identified *process improvements*, for which IT serves as an enabler.¹⁰

This recommendation is one of a number of 'cross-cutting messages ... emphasized by international experts among others,' following international exchange of experience. It demonstrates how the need to break the fixation with technologies is acknowledged, but the preoccupation is still over 'process improvements' in governmental terms.

Another example comes from the e-government strategy for the government of Western Australia.¹¹ The vision for this strategy is of '*a more efficient public sector that delivers integrated services and improved opportunities for community participation*'. This sounds as if there is at least some recognition that dialogue is important. However, it turns out that in this strategy, community participation means no more than:

⁸ <http://www.icele.org/site/index.php>

⁹ *Ibid*, emphasis added.

¹⁰ See Joint Economic Research Program, e-government videoconference series, mid-term progress report and the road ahead, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEGOVERNMENT/Resources/VCREport.pdf>, March 2006. Accessed 17 December 2006, emphasis added.

¹¹ <http://www.egov.dpc.wa.gov.au/index.cfm?event=strategiesEgov>

Easier interaction so that people can understand and contribute to government.

Examples like this provoke questions about the extent to which understandings of *empowerment* and *participation* are part of e-government and e-governance strategies, or whether they are overlooked as irrelevant or too difficult.

The World Bank has offered the following definition of e-government:¹²

“E-Government” refers to the use by government agencies of information technologies (such as Wide Area Networks, the Internet, and mobile computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. These technologies can serve a variety of different ends: better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information, or more efficient government management. The resulting benefits can be less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth, and/or cost reductions.

Traditionally, the interaction between a citizen or business and a government agency took place in a government office. With emerging information and communication technologies it is possible to locate service centers closer to the clients... E-government aims to make the interaction between government and citizens (G2C), government and business enterprises (G2B), and inter-agency relationships (G2G) more friendly, convenient, transparent, and inexpensive.

The global e-government project is enormously complex. One US report listed the following set of challenges:

(1) sustaining committed executive leadership, (2) building effective E-Government business cases, (3) maintaining a citizen focus, (4) protecting personal privacy, (5) implementing appropriate security controls, (6) maintaining electronic records, (7) maintaining a robust technical infrastructure, (8) addressing IT human capital concerns, and (9) ensuring uniform service to the public.¹³

This reminds us not to under-estimate the difficulties of building effective systems, and not to expect too much too soon. E-government, after all, is not *in itself* necessarily about social inclusion or empowerment. But it *is* implicated in the promotion of these themes in two respects.

¹²

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTINFORMATIONANDCOMMUNICATIONANDTECHNOLOGIES/EXTEGOVERNMENT/0,,contentMDK:20507153~menuPK:702592~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:702586,00.html>

¹³ General Accounting Office, *Electronic government*, 2001. Cited by Jaeger and Thompson (2003: 390).

First, e-government requires a connection to inclusion and empowerment because it is a responsibility of *government* (and in the overall interests of society generally) that social exclusion should be minimised and citizens empowered to manage their relationships with the authorities they elect. Secondly, the connection is imperative because the use of electronic media generally is strongly associated with potential shifts (sometimes viewed positively, sometimes negatively) in exclusion and power.

Globally, this message is clear from the emphasis placed in the five recommendations of the 2005 UN global e-government readiness report. It states that:

The first imperative is to *recognize the importance of providing equal opportunity for participation in the information society*; and the third recommendation is the need: *for a vision to develop a socially inclusive development strategy, which aims at the empowerment of each according to his capabilities.* (UN 2005: 191)

There is a striking difference between this language and the language of e-government used by the World Bank or in the strategy documents of leading nations like Australia or Canada. It's rare to find recognition in e-government strategies of the potential for the *engagement* or *empowerment* of citizens; or for the co-development of systems with other processes that involve and empower citizens. If nothing else, this illustrates the unconvincing relation between government and governance, between service delivery and the involvement of citizens in the shaping of those services. It's as if the technicians charged with implementing these complex systems have been given their blueprints and have gone away to make things work, not having their attention drawn to the possibility that the tide of engaged governance is swelling right outside their workshops.

Two points arise. First, we could see this as just being about the need to join-up official initiatives. Many governments and other authorities (national, regional, and local) now have policy statements and functioning structures concerned with engagement and participation under certain areas such as policing, planning or health service provision, and numerous local authorities have participatory budgeting practices. These themes recur increasingly widely. And we can find, for example, empowerment and governance as key criteria in the World Bank's approach to 'social accountability' – the principle by which ordinary citizens and civil society organisations participate in exacting accountability.¹⁴ In this case it would seem sensible to ensure a meaningful connection between social accountability and e-government.

But, secondly, it's possible that *government* as delivery on the one hand, and *governance through engagement* on the other, may be being promoted and managed with culturally quite distinct approaches. While conventional

¹⁴ See

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/EXTPCENG>

government may call for mechanistic processes more appropriate for the industrial age, engagement calls for more subtle, informal and more flexible processes, reflecting the characteristics of the network society, which in turn may call for a quite different set of skills.

Thus for example, reviewing the early experience of citizen-oriented online services at Birmingham City Council in the UK, Ian Goodwin found that the idea of developing new forms of active engagement with citizens or community groups was much more problematic than information provision: The interactivity required cuts to the heart of issues of power and control within the organisation. (Goodwin 2005: 380)

This theme of a conceptual contrast between approaches to government and engagement can be highlighted by limited understanding of the potential offered by new technologies. For example, UK commentator Lawrence Pratchett claims that:

those involved in implementing e-democracy at the local level must be careful to provide good reasons for using e-tools. Why would neighbours want to communicate online when they can just as easily (and possibly more cheaply) communicate through more traditional methods? (Pratchett 2006: 326)

There might be numerous answers to the question posed: for convenience; because they're temporarily housebound; because they're doing other things online at the time; because they prefer to communicate asynchronously; and so on. Pratchett's argument is an example of *either-or* thinking. It doesn't help to present online as an alternative, rather than as a complement, to other forms of communication, as if direct comparison was meaningful. The point which is important here is that many people still have difficulty breaking away from either-or thinking about new technologies. The explanation may be that post-industrial society has placed high value on sequential logical thinking, which has involved the incidental development of systems that attempt to minimise the need for trust. It may be that in the network society we will see this value reduced significantly, as greater emphasis comes to be placed on networking, informality, engagement, and trust. Paul Skidmore in his essay on leadership quotes Danny Chesterman:

The first assumption is that consensus is necessary by all before any partnership can act collaboratively... We talk as if agreement is a precondition for action. It isn't. But sufficient trust is.¹⁵

Indeed, the e-democracy experiments under the European e-Agora programme seem to suggest this very feature:

The experiments showed that citizen participation and the use of ICT to encourage it, are ways leading to an improvement in the quality of democratic systems: they allow an increase in trust in political systems, transparenc[y] of government action and effectiveness of administrative techniques. (Welp 2006: 305)

¹⁵ Cited in Skidmore (2004: 96).

What is striking is that the efforts to staple the e- in front of various forms of service delivery continue apace with little adjustment to the political transformations going on around. The culture of democracy-as-experienced on the one hand, and what we might broadly call neighbourhood management on the other (meaning the realities of managing everyday local environments through policing, the maintenance of amenities, health or housing services and so on, all susceptible to apparently increasing influence through channels of 'community engagement') – these are becoming more fluid and less instrumental processes as they are freed up to network forces. Where then is the model of online service delivery that absorbs, accommodates and exploits these changes?



Over the past five years, social software and social media have been gathering quiet momentum. In the next section I consider their place in relation to democracy and engagement.

Social media: 'it feels more democratic'

"A funny thing happened on the way to the forum, people connected and used the Internet as a social tool." Mayfield (2005: 116)

The power of internet technology has led to the development of various new means of communicating and sharing information. Some of these have come to be bracketed as 'social media' in that they are predominantly used outside the business, governmental and academic fields; and because they contribute to the myriad ways in which people make and reinforce social connections. As Will Davies put it,

Social software produces a new type of communication, between a conversation and a broadcast. It challenges the drift towards intimacy that is so tempting for all networks and organisations, because it publicises and codifies informal chat. (Davies 2003: 52)

Over the past few years, social media has expanded, as systems to enable people easily to handle and share images and sound as well as text (podcasting, flickr, youtube, myspace etc) have gained huge popularity. Colin Delaney, focusing on 'online participatory tools,' describes social media in fairly narrow terms: 'content that is created by site users rather than by a central person or group.' (Delaney 2006) It certainly seems to be the case that, as Bryant and Wilcox report, much of the rhetoric about the web invokes an 'architecture of participation,' to support many-to-many interaction:

In the jargon, it is about creating social affordances based on network effects - i.e. new things are possible with a critical mass of connected people and content that we could not do before. Crucially, this process has a human voice - it places great importance on *the value of conversation* rather than just information sharing. (Bryant and Wilcox 2006, emphasis added)

And within this post-modern world of social potential, the blogging phenomenon continues to provoke discussion about democracy and the public realm. It would certainly be naïve and misleading to represent blogging as some kind of holy grail of democratic communication. Much of what seems to happen on the web generally, and even in the blogosphere, is far from conversational - more 'interpassive' than interactive. But, crucially, most blogs are readily open to comment, and the power of linking to other observations and resources generates an accumulation of interaction. Andrew Ó Baoill makes the point that:

the blogosphere is comprised of many interwoven conversations between small groups of people. (Ó Baoill 2004)

The impact of blogging remains difficult to discern. In the future there could be fewer blogs having more cumulative impact, or there could be more having less impact. Analysts have predicted that the number of blogs is expected to

level out at about 100 million sometime in 2007. An estimated 200 million people have started blogging and given up.¹⁶

But what may matter is the communicative style that this phenomenon indicates. The way that one blog links to another, and ideas and opinions get circulated, challenged, honed and re-articulated, suggests that there are conversations going on quite independently of the mainstream media and political college. Bryant and Wilcox describe it like this:

Weblogs are technically little different to the personal homepages that proliferated in the early days of the net, but the difference is they are now at the centre of millions of connected conversations that are taking place between individuals without mediation by mainstream media, traditional organisations or IT departments. (Bryant and Wilcox 2006)

Hence the popular notion of the citizen journalist, empowered by the technology to articulate their opinion, perhaps to gain an audience, and to challenge the pronouncements of others.

So what is it that suggests that blogging might have particular significance, in terms of citizen communication? Stephen Coleman lists three democratising characteristics of the blogosphere:

- it provides a bridge between the private, subjective sphere of self-expression and the socially fragile civic sphere in which publics can form and act;
- blogs allow people to express incomplete thoughts;
- blogs lower the threshold of entry to the global debate for traditionally unheard or marginalised voices. (Coleman 2005a: 277)

Nonetheless, political debate is still dominated by the mainstream media. Like a story recounted in a pub, most of the time a comment on a blog will have little impact unless it gets repackaged in the newspapers or on television. Until, that is, a form of online critical mass comes into play. Barely noticed in the traditional arenas, blogs are linked into informal clusters, and stories and opinions gather momentum, through comments and links. Network conversations are taking place. The question arises; will the conversations and commentating that citizens have *with one another* gather sufficient weight to become recognised as key resources of democracy?

If the blogging phenomenon suggests a wave of social connectedness, older technologies also play their part in promoting collective empowerment and participation. The World Bank offers this example of internet radio:

The Community Empowerment and Local Government Project (CEP) in Timor-Leste was the first CDD project with an explicit component to support community radio. With eight stations operating, the project has assisted with the training of management board members, volunteer reporters, managers, and technicians since the establishment of the stations in late 2002 through mid-2003. Loty Salazar, Information

¹⁶ *BBC News*, 14 December 2006,
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/6178611.stm>

Officer in the East Asia and Pacific Region, who works on the project, notes that the project component has had initial results and positive impact in several areas, including: (i) improved access to information and news; (ii) increased youth participation, particularly for women; (iii) efforts of inclusion, peace and dialogue, and (iv) enhanced accountability.¹⁷

If projects like this are somehow not seen as contributing to empowerment and governance, consider another example, from the same source:

In Ghana, a remote community used their radio station to press a local parliamentarian to deliver on his promise to provide a road. On the air, they called for him to come to face the community. Before long, construction began.¹⁸

Towards the end of the last century the established technology of telephony began to prove itself in pioneering ways for social networking. From large-scale initiatives like the Grameen 'village phone' model in Bangladesh,¹⁹ to a local mobile phone network for community activists seeking to minimise street violence in Belfast (Hall 2003), or a similar highly-sensitive support network for women experiencing domestic violence in England, various technical developments with mobile phones that previously were not possible have given demonstrable opportunities for empowerment and participation in the network society.

While older technologies benefit from refinements, newer devices take time to find their niche in communicative behaviour. Podcasting pioneer Nick Booth, in his British Council seminar presentation in March 2006, said that podcasting is about (among other things):

- Speaking and listening
- Building confidence
- The mundane is important
- Extending networks
- Opening up networks.

He went on to ask:

It feels more democratic. Is it?

Perhaps we need to wait a few more years before we can determine a sensible answer to this question, and we would certainly want to be clear about the changing and charged expectations loaded into the word 'democratic.' Attempting to answer his own question, Booth adds some reflections on the impact of podcasting:

It creates new spaces where people can express themselves and debate, it makes a new breed of grassroots local and international media

¹⁷

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTEMPOWERMENT/0,,contentMDK:20268016~menuPK:543262~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:486411,00.html>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ <http://www.grameen-info.org/grameen/gtelecom/>

possible... [But] it is also a challenge to our conventional political systems.... It makes it easier for the anti-democratic to have a voice.²⁰

What distinguishes blogging, podcasting and other so-called social media is their unambiguously *horizontal* cultural alignment: here citizens address one another, and they do so with technologies which allow their contributions to accrete, to solidify and gain mass. Social media are often closely associated with new forms of participation, and indeed terms like 'participatory media' are increasingly used in debates about their potential and impact. It's instructive to compare another form of popular communication, talk radio, which it might be argued is populist but not necessarily democratic, and too ephemeral to have lasting impact.

Social media also highlight a commonly-overlooked distinction between web-use and email-use. When we speak of levels of internet use, we tend clumsily to conflate these two uses. Keith Hampton, in research carried out in neighbourhoods in Boston USA, found clear differences between heavy web-use and heavy email-use:

Use of the internet for passive information viewing (web use) is similar to television in its negative effect on social capital. Those who use the web more frequently have networks that are less extensive, meaning they are not as connected to 'different kinds of people'... Those who are more frequent email users have more extensive neighbourhood based social networks. (Hampton 2002: 14)

Social media do appear to reflect more accurately than service-oriented e-government systems the less formal style of engaged democracy which I have tried to describe. One policy question that arises from this discussion is whether those in positions of power will feel able 'to foster the power of grass-roots knowledge-sharing networks, which allow people to represent themselves to one another.' (Coleman 2005b: 14) In considering this question I would argue that we should also pay attention to the parallel development of e-government systems and the need for a clearer sense of common direction. The point is made by Ari-Veikko Anttiroiko (2006: 268) who anticipates the need for a 'close connection' between the use of technologies and the revitalisation of democratic theory and practice. However, it is not an easy matter to probe the features of the technologies or of democracy, that will characterise and guarantee that connection. The nature of this task is by now, I hope, a little clearer.

²⁰ Nick Booth, <http://www.podnosh.com/>, personal communication, January 2007.

Concluding remarks

At root, the popular and even utopian hopes invested in information technology, and especially in the Internet, derive from a profound faith in the power and value of human communication, its ability to reach across borders, touch minds, inspire intelligence, and both expand and strengthen the boundaries of self and community. Communication is an enormously complex and tangled affair, of course, full of tricks and noise, and our contemporary ideology of efficient and productive information exchange often ignores this rich and troubling ambiguity. (Davis 1999: 265)

The contrasts between e-government and social media highlight the 'rich ambiguity' in human communication described by Erik Davis. While e-government systems seek to reduce 'noise,' for obvious reasons, social media could be said to constitute noise, in the sense that they represent the conversations that are going on, and are not preoccupied with efficiency of transaction.

There may be a logic to ignoring the human communication component in designing systems for online delivery of government services, but it could be time to explore another approach. Given that such developments are widely associated with the reform and modernisation of central and local government, we could be witnessing modernised governments that are already out-of-date in the sense of being detached from the momentum of conversational, engaged democracy that is beginning to flourish around them.

There are justifiable expectations that in governance as in business and elsewhere, online technologies can flatten hierarchies and enhance communication and co-operation. Nonetheless, much of the discourse has shown a shallow preoccupation with the use of the technology to facilitate relations between those governed and those who govern, on a somewhat static model of this relationship. Thus, much attention has been paid to applications of the technologies for informing citizens, carrying out transactions between government and citizen, developing virtual decision-making environments, and devising electronic voting systems. In themselves these are wholly worthwhile initiatives, but the organisational and institutional context for participative democracy is changing in the background. As Jay Blumler and Stephen Coleman have noted with regard to the UK situation:

Institutions that previously organised meaning, identity and authoritative information for many people... - notably, political parties, the nuclear family, mainstream religion, the workplace and neighbourhood and social class groupings – have all waned in salience and influence. (Blumler and Coleman 2001: 8)

While we have sought enthusiastically, through mechanistic approaches, to adopt and apply new technologies to the established processes of

government, the nature of the appropriate processes has shifted in two fundamental ways. First, orientation towards inclusion, empowerment and engagement is increasingly expected as an essential component in modern democracies; and secondly, by extension, we find that *governance* supported by community engagement begins to receive as much emphasis in contemporary discourse as *service delivery*, and thus threatens to make the numerous fashionable e-government projects look conceptually outdated, because they are not happening where the transformation of democracy is taking place.

One risk is that authorities (and local authorities in particular) assume that they have to take a lead, play a role, coordinate or in some way control or regulate these multiple voices that are emerging. In practice it could be that what is most needed is for managers, mayors, councillors and officers to listen more, to tune in to these opinions and to adjust their style to the new culture of conversational democracy, to join in on conversations without seeking, or feeling expected, to dominate them.

In some ways, the question that this essay has been asking is about the relationship of democracy to government. It's not clear whether the practice of e-government, in its essentially mechanistic approach to service delivery, is being or can be adapted to the changing nature of democracy. Service delivery surely matters to citizens as much now as it ever did: the difference is that involvement and engagement now matter far more than before. Democratic systems are working to accommodate and contribute to this transformation, serving a future of engaged democracy. The need is for effort to be put in to governance systems that reflect this, in the interests of the well-connected and the less-connected citizens of the future.

E-government systems have to begin to take into account the transforming nature of democracy, the associated emphasis on collective identity, *and* the potential and significance of social media.

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