

Citizen Engagement: the next horizon for digital government

For: Labor Essays

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'Good government is expensive, bad government is unaffordable'

A mantra for governance in the twenty first century

Abstract

Governments at all levels are facing new challenges to their legitimacy. Calls for greater transparency and participation are heard not just by elected officials, but also in corporate headquarters. At every stage of the policy process, digital communications can either enhance or inhibit democratic accountabilities. In the best of worlds, participation becomes a design element, and consultation a fine art, digitally documented. The other extreme, lack of transparency, can also be designed for, but with repercussions.

This chapter looks at the ways governments are repositioning themselves to adapt to an information age. Many agencies have only recently realised that delivering information and services online is just the start of a long pathway to meeting expectations of the new 'digerati'.

Increasingly responsive services are one important form of adaptation, as these open the doors to iterative feedback and development. The smarter 'networked' officials become increasingly facilitators and centres of fluid change, rather than stolid determiners of static policies. Such agility requires speed and scope, assisted by many fingers flying across keyboards. Canadian work on the 'networked' model of government (Richard 2000) describes these changes and their benefits. In Australia, the federal government has been slowest to embrace the transformational capacity of digital communications. The potential for citizen engagement and responsiveness is strongest at local level and within communities of interest, as several examples will demonstrate. Research from many areas shows that use of online technologies in policy engagement has been much slower to develop than services.

This chapter aims to give an overview of the new arenas for digital citizenship. After briefly outlining the kinds of democratic protocols that might allow it to flourish, I focus is on electronic consultation in the context of active citizenship and citizen engagement.

Boundaries of Digital Government

In the past decade Australian governments at all levels have made enormous changes to the ways they do business, inform and interact with citizens. This has corresponded to an exponential increase in the use of online technologies by all sectors. The overwhelming balance of government effort has gone into providing information more efficiently to citizens and streamlining payments and transactions. This orientation towards service delivery as a focus for e-government efforts is not unique to Australia. Studies from other countries and at all levels of government have found that policy participation and citizen consultation, the bread and butter of digital democracy, has largely been a neglected area.

Electronic democracy is of course much more than the effective use of technology in governance processes. It implies the use of communication technologies to deliver democratic outcomes. Just as the Internet exists due to a set of protocols for the transmission of information, so may electronic democracy

be seen in relation to a set of protocols that facilitate the criteria of democratic, as outlined by Dahl (1989). Below is one effort to link information protocols to democratic values:

Protocols for democratic information infrastructure. From (Geiselhart 1999), with evidence from major case study deleted.

Protocol
Universal access
Appropriate training
Transparency of information, including feedback and agenda setting, strong freedom of information provisions. All major decisions fully textualised.
Deliberate creation and maintenance of a public space for communication, protected from commercial pressures
Strong interactivity (open ended input)
Broadest and earliest possible participation in agenda setting and internal policy development
Minimisation of commercial in confidence protection
Freedom from direct or indirect censorship
Maximisation of privacy protection
Equity in rights of transmission
Provision for lateral and anonymous communication and ballots
Availability of alternative forms and sources of information
Provision for localised information and dialogue
Mechanisms for reflective deliberation about the information system

Few government jurisdictions (and even fewer corporations) meet these standards of governance, which extend far beyond consultation to transparency, accountability and citizen to citizen transmission. A study of OECD countries (Gualtieri 1998) found that governments had not really begun to explore the use of new technologies for policy determination and accountability. Gualtieri found reluctance came from both public servants and citizens; a combination of risk aversion and apathy. Some movement towards electronic citizen engagement has occurred since then. A more recent survey of 270 municipal

government web sites in California found that they were more likely to support a business efficiency rather than a participatory model (Musso, Weare and Hale 2000). One of the most comprehensive reviews of current uses of electronic government in America (Curtin et al 2002) also found most governments focussed on a narrow view of service delivery. Overall, both within Australia and elsewhere, opportunities for interactivity or participation in actual decision making are less common than a service based approach to e-government.

However, in recent years a number of Australian jurisdictions have adopted programs and policies to assist active citizenship, both on and off-line. At the federal level, 'closer citizen engagement' is one of six elements in the federal government's e-government strategy. There is currently little sign of a cohesive approach to what this might mean in practice, although many agencies are integrating electronic communications in their policy development and reviews.¹ There have also been several non-governmental experiments with electronic democracy, mostly in the form of consultative processes.²

These initiatives, and the state projects outlined below, are partly efficiency measures. The forms of public input and information dissemination they use would be impractical if not implemented online. The digital environment makes broader inputs feasible and affordable, at least to those who are connected. The new kinds of literacies that underpin these new forms of citizenship include the ability to search and skim, look up information online, read visually and contextualise.³ With this come new forms of illiteracy, and the danger of a growing divide between the engaged and the uninterested. The skillful and passionate minority can become the loudest voices, and conceal the growing number who don't care or feel disenfranchised. Yet even these groups are using the online world to exercise a different kind of citizenship.

Government Examples of Digital Citizenship

An integrated approach to digital citizenship will create linkages between online and traditional provision of information, services, and consultation. A good example at the national level is Australia's Future Using Education Technology (<http://www.dest.gov.au/afuet/>). This uses online documents as background for both face to face and online consultations. While this is most likely to attract a narrow group of participants, it is open to anyone. It also offers good practice in reflecting back discussion summaries to those who have 'signed on' via email.

Federal achievements of e-government are documented in the report *Transforming Government* (NOIE 2003). It is noteworthy that none of the 20 case studies presented relate to citizen involvement in policy processes, although 'closer citizen engagement' is one of six key objectives for the latest Commonwealth E-government strategy (2002). Information about the weather, or Gallipoli, or even providing expert advice about family payments may be useful, but does not necessarily contribute to participation in government decision making. Although some initiatives, such as the Regional Entry Point, point towards discussion forums, these are generally not used much. This may be partly an issue of technological literacy and maturity, and partly an issue of marketing and facilitation, which are always challenging once the scope is wider than local. In general, the Commonwealth government lags behind the states and several overseas leaders the United Kingdom in the development of electronic democracy.

The federal web site providing information about citizenship (<http://www.citizenship.gov.au>) does not include an 'active' dimension. There is not yet a broad strategic direction or guidelines on best practice in consultation. This may partly reflect a certain lag in the digital literacy of elected officials, as well as some bureaucrats. One federal agency head considered an email response mechanism too bold for implementation on the web site, and was surprised to find out that it had been there for months, without damaging repercussions. That was in 1999, and undoubtedly great advances have occurred since then. In a valuable benchmarking survey, Chen (2002) surveyed elected officials' use of the Internet at all levels of government. Of the 20% who responded, the overwhelming majority made regular use of the Internet. That is good news. Not surprisingly, there were both geographic and jurisdictional differences, as well as

differences in reported skill levels and technology support. There were reported high levels of 'online consultation', but this seemed to be mostly email exchanges with members of the public.

Awareness of the potential for technology to improve communications with constituents is gradually increasing. State and Federal information technology Ministers stated in 2002 that electronic democracy is 'a significant issue emerging for governments in Australia and agreed that Australia's position as a world leader in eGovernment continues to be reflected in progress regarding e-democracy' (Online Council Joint Media Statement 2002).

Ministers noted the range of potential e-democracy initiatives, from the provision of information online to inform discussion, the screening of parliamentary sessions via the Internet, governments actively consulting on policy development through online discussion fora, to the potential of electronic and Internet voting. These expressions need to be balanced against recent events which have called government communications and openness into question, such as the 'children overboard' affair, problems with corporate probity and their regulatory oversight, and more recently concerns about intelligence information relating to the war on Iraq.

At the state level, New South Wales doesn't have an explicit policy on electronic democracy, but promotes active citizenship through its well-regarded Community Builders web site. This is described as 'an interactive electronic clearing house for everyone involved in community level social, economic and environmental renewal.' The site aggregates resources about community development and capacity building, and offers case studies on a range of topics such as sustainability, volunteering, funding, and local projects. These are important dimensions of active citizenship, and a discussion forum facilitates learning and allows for a wider circulation of ideas and requests for information. This approach is one of many that is informed by 'smart community' approaches are part of the wider conceptual orientation of digital democracy discussed below.

Illegal drugs have been a contentious issue in New South Wales, and the 'safe shooting room' at Kings Cross has attracted wide public debate. The Drugs and Community Action area of the Community Builders site holds extensive information on this topic, including articles and research both local and international. The only element missing for informed debate is an online mechanism for dialogue with other interested groups. Governments tend to steer away from email lists or chat for legal reasons and also to avoid the burden of moderation. One option is to link to other places online where such discussions take place, and the Drugs and Community Action resources list ample events, groups and other avenues for becoming involved off-line.

While all this suggests that citizen engagement in public policy is proceeding nicely, this does not apply to all issues. The NSW government fell short of full disclosure on their plans for a charcoal factory on the south coast, both online and off (Geiselhart 2002). On this issue, a community group played a large role in providing information and citizen engagement (Allen 2003).

Other state governments are also gradually moving to make more information available online and facilitate public inputs on a select range of issues. Some more ambitious proposals to implement electronic democracy may tend to fade a bit over time. In Victoria, the Connecting Victoria statement (1999) included plans for 'promoting a new politics' that would 'use new technologies to open up the processes of Parliament and government to the people of Victoria'. However, the progress report on this policy (2002) subsumes this under statistics about the improvements to services. Apparently Victorians have access to more online services than citizens from any other jurisdiction in the world. Passing mention is made of an experiment in electronic consultation called 'Have Your Say' and a forthcoming report of a Parliamentary enquiry into e-democracy.

The Western Australian government established the Citizens and Civics Unit (CCU) to develop and promote active citizenship and engage the community in continuous dialogue. The vision offered is 'a stronger more democratic society where all citizens have the confidence and capacity to participate

effectively in all aspects of community life.⁴ The goals and activities of the CCU are framed in terms of consultation, life-long learning and dialogue. They seek to provide the tools for active citizenship, including information about advocacy, resources to support interaction with government, and of course, adequate background documents about issues and policy processes.

Given a sufficiently robust approach to citizenship, digital tools can provide a seamless entry to an expanded set of possibilities not available in pre-Internet eras. Online aspects of citizenship which are gradually becoming standard fare for state governments include a catalogue of consultations, resources for groups seeking to influence government, and a whole of government triple bottom line approach, which seeks to integrate social, economic and environmental sustainability. The Internet, through its easy linking capacity, makes integration more feasible than print media. In addition, the WA government identifies 'governance' as another bottom line, thus adding an overt reflexive component. It is a particularly well-articulated example of these trends which are extending the concept of government service to the provision of opportunities for active citizenship. As one would expect, extensive off-line consultation underpins these strategies, and the supporting documents are available online.

The Queensland government has perhaps the most developed approach to electronic democracy, as outlined in their E-democracy policy framework (November 2001). The emphasis is on timeliness, accessibility and facilitation. Queensland has also implemented several trials: of e-petitions (finishes in August 2003), Internet broadcasting of the Queensland Parliament, and online consultations. Value is added to these consultations by publishing basic demographic statistics about the participants on the site. A reflective component is provided through a brief survey to gather information about how users of the site found it, ease of use, level of interest in Internet consultation, and some open ended questions about how people would like to communicate with government.

Citizen initiated digital citizenship projects

Governments haven't been the only active players in digital citizenship. Other responses have come from the private sector, academia, and organised interest groups. It is only possible here to briefly mention several of these. Meikle (2002) provides a broader survey of the forms of citizen activism online. The Independent Media Center, a loose collective of non-corporate media organisations and journalists, is of high importance, not just for the alternative viewpoints and information, but for the global networking it facilitates. This is part of a wider trend towards 'citizens sans frontiers', as groups and individuals form new coalitions that transcend local boundaries and structures (Geiselhart forthcoming).

It is more likely that experiments in online debate will come from the academic or private sectors. A 1998 combined research/small business initiative in Canberra provided the first online debate between candidates in an Australian State or Territory election (Geiselhart 1999). While this achieved good attention at the time, no similar pilots have been observed in Australia.

Returning to the charcoal factory issue in NSW mentioned above, Allen (2003) provides a succinct report of the extensive ways that the Internet assisted citizens in asserting their views on this topic. A powerful element was the humble email list, which facilitated the flow of information, requests, offers of assistance, and general organising of meetings, resources and media access.

Workers Online, an award winning online product of LaborNet, exists to 'promote debate within the trade union movement, provide a platform for union stories and act as a counter-balance to the mainstream media's coverage of workplace issues.' Not surprisingly, many groups see the Internet as a counter to Australia's highly concentrated media ownership.

OnlineOpinion.com is a non-profit journal that seeks to provide a politically neutral online space for views and discussion. It gives voice to many well known opinion leaders, but also to those in what might be called 'the second tier', or people who cannot always get published in mainstream media. Articles fall into themes and topics, and over time create an archive of informed discussion.

Another project initiated by a civic-minded consultant, Mark Randell, is Civic Chat, in Western Australia. This is a web-based bulletin board for citizen discussion of local issues, designed to cover all local government areas in WA. It is free for citizens, but local councils pay a yearly access fee (Randell in press). Since it was set up in mid 2002, it has grown slowly by word of mouth, but so far local governments have been slow to make use of it. This may reflect the hesitation shown by many government officials when confronted with the open-ended nature of Internet communications. One federal bureaucrat summed up these concerns when offered electronic options for communication with stakeholders: 'You mean we wouldn't be able to control who we communicate with?' Technology by itself cannot change culture, and few organisations have the courage to turn themselves 'inside out' if this may bring greater scrutiny and possible criticism. In the early days of the adoption of Internet strategies by government several cross-agency mailing lists thrived (described in Geiselhart 1999). These eventually collapsed, perhaps due to the prevailing currents of centralised control. Technology is always a fulcrum for both innovation and power (Feenberg 1991).

An exemplary overseas example illustrates the scope of digital citizenship projects. The California Voter Foundation (CVF) is non-profit and non-partisan, but provides extensive resources to assist the democratic process. For example, they maintain an archive of campaign promises and a list of candidates' 'progress statements'. The CVF has a 'digital sunshine' project to help inform the public about the value of computerising the disclosure process for important public records such as campaign contributions. They provide resources that promote Internet access to political disclosure records. In December 1999, they ranked all 50 states for their efforts to provide online campaign finance data. This is the sharp end of electronic democracy, so far little explored in Australia. Of course, California draws on a much wider pool, not just of people but also of technological sophistication and maturity, not to mention problems. However it points the way to the next stages in the digital transformation of democracy, which the final section outlines.

Future developments in digital citizenship

While electronic democracy has become a more common concept in recent years, it is not yet mainstream. There is much conflation with e-voting, and the more gritty issues of determining standards for reporting government and corporate activities. The push for greater disclosure is coming partly from projects such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), which seeks to develop and disseminate globally applicable standards on sustainability. This involves a triple bottom line approach that integrates economic, social and environmental factors, with participation from business, labour, research, and environmental groups. This is the sort of integrative process that may be seen as a hopeful dimension of globalisation. Such policies have the potential to reverberate at multiple levels of action, especially the local. They promote digital expression of socially progressive and democratic values, rather than expecting technological tinkering to alter underlying dynamics of transparency.

Standards Australia has just published standards of corporate governance, including social responsibility and organisational codes of behaviour. These specify 'a blueprint for the development and implementation of a generic system of governance suitable for a wide range of entities.' If widely adopted and promoted, these standards will lead to guidelines on their digital representation, and will be a firm step in the direction of good corporate citizenship and public transparency.

The above examples are based on the articulation of normative values rather assuming technological solutions to social and political problems. This is consistent with one of the most widespread influences on current thinking in relation to technology and social change. That is a complex adaptive systems approach, initially applied to physical and biological systems, but increasingly used to help understand social patterns. The symbiosis between these realms is clearly presented in Capra (1996) and Bossomaier and Green (1998). Complex adaptive systems offer both concepts and mathematics to analyse the dynamics of many situations that may have many actors but often a simple set of underlying rules. This approach has become a major driver of new management theory. In human systems, it is recognised that

the rules of interaction for the system are driven by the values of the actors (Theys 1998). It has been suggested that similar patterns appear at all scales of observation for such behaviour as industrial strikes (Biggs 2001) or governance (Geiselhart 1999).

Increasingly responsive services are one important form of adaptation, as these open the doors to iterative feedback and development. The smarter 'networked' officials become increasingly facilitators and centres of fluid change, rather than stolid determiners of static policies. Such agility requires speed and scope, assisted by many fingers flying across keyboards. Canadian work on the 'networked' model of government (Richard 2000) describes these changes and their benefits. This paradigm shift to networked, non-linear processes with open-ended inputs and outputs is also evident in the electronic democracy literature (Becker and Slayton 2000). Basically, a widely accessible technological infrastructure has the potential to foster many more diverse set of voices and actions. These can form complex adaptive systems that influence both larger and smaller scales. Whether these will generate social goods or terrorism depends, again, on the values of the actors.

These rather abstract observations can be distilled into a new view of diversity and pluralism, such as is seen in the adoption of open source as not just a method for producing robust software, but also as a philosophy and a methodology. Thus, open source journalism, a description that may be applied to maverick Australian columnist and shareholder activist Steve Mayne, of crikey.com.au, is a fresh approach, however contentious, to digital participation.

Over time, areas such as Freedom of Information are likely to be revised to better match citizen expectations. Archiving and information management of government documents is another topic for the future of digital citizenship. At every stage of the policy process and program implementation and evaluation, digital communications can either enhance or inhibit democratic accountabilities. In the best of worlds, participation becomes a design element and consultation a fine art, digitally documented. The other extreme, lack of transparency, can also be designed for, but with repercussions. We have only just started on the long path towards full democratic governance and richly interactive digital citizenship.

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¹ Kowalski (2002) surveyed Victorian local councils and found that many of them are using the Internet to broaden their consultation and integrate new techniques, such as chat, in their communication strategies.

² See, for example, the online discussions run by the Australian Public Policy Research Network, <http://www.apprn.org>

³ Warschauer (2002) discusses digital divide and literacy issues.

⁴ Vision statement, Citizens and Civics Unit. <http://www.ccu.dpc.wa.gov.au/>