

Is e-governance a function of government or media? Some directions for future research and development of electronically mediated citizen participation

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Abstract

Citizen participation, enabled by electronic means, grows, in parallel with government's apparent failure to promote it. Organisations such as Getup and Moveon flourish; the BBC announced in 2003 that 'Internet-based political activism is happening ...The BBC wants to help a wider audience find their voice by tackling obstacles to greater participation' (<http://www.opendemocracy.net>). (Kevill, 2003). Such actions echo, perhaps, the enthusiastic adoption of the Internet by activist media groups, particularly Indymedia.

This paper presents a response to this situation. It provides a richer account of the contradictory rise of e-government without e-governance, and examines the potential for media-based participatory engagement to complement e-government. It presents two models of the future of electronically mediated citizen engagement: the first involving agonistic relations between government and citizenry, with civic participation occurring outside of government-approved forums; the second involving the intimate linking of governmental transactions to participation by those citizens engaged in them. Finally it will outline mechanisms for researching the capacity of either or both models to sustain effective participation.

Governance Models

The application of the Internet to the provision of government information and services is well established in most advanced societies at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Websites and services are used for all manner of interactions between the governed and their bureaucratic governors, whether it is applying for government documents; requesting particular services; or simply staying informed about what the government believes is important to know. E-government is indeed fulfilling its promise to speed up, make more efficient, regularize, and generally make the processes of government *informatic*. (Grönlund, 2002; Gibson, Ward and Rommele, 2004). Even several years ago, the United Nations reported there was a greater expansion in government online presence than in the previous five years combined. Between 1996 and 2001 the number of official government homepages grew from less than 50 to well over 50,000 official government websites. Moreover the websites have transformed from simple public affairs ‘e-brochures’ to virtual information centres where the interaction between citizen users and the public sector is continuous (ASPA and UNDPEPA, 2001, 5).

The rise of e-government in this way has, however, largely blotted out and even worked against, any concomitant development of enhanced citizen participation in their own governance utilizing the Internet. The early promise of the Internet was, in part, to provide a new kind of political engagement; this engagement, enabled by clever technology, would reinvent participatory democracy so that it could be practiced in spite of the mass populations and spatial extent of contemporary societies. It would appear this early promise – despite much talk – has never been realized: e-government does not involve participation so much as compliance. The potential of the Internet to improve civic participation has been largely ignored because current models of government do not engage citizens in decision-making. Put simply, government is not governance. (Blomgren Bingham, Nabatchi and O’Leary

2005). Government is about those with the legal and policing power who are able execute and implement activities and policies. 'Governance refers to the creation, execution, and implementation of activities backed by the shared goals of citizens and organizations, who may or may not have formal authority and policing power (Blomgren Bingham, Nabatchi and O'Leary 2005).

Yet the need for such engagement remains strong; the potential of the Internet to make it happen remains alluring. Putnam famously argued that citizen engagement is a way of 'totalitarian proofing' democracy (2000); the inconvenience it poses to bureaucracy a sign that it is essential. Thinkers and activists continue to engage with the Internet as the way of improving engagement; for example, Coleman and Norris (2005) have regularly emphasized the importance of governments seizing the opportunity of the Internet so as to make their own citizenry part of government.

The distinction government and governance became particularly marked in the 1990s with the impact of private sector networks outside public administration on policy:

Perhaps the dominant feature of the governance model is the argument that networks have come to dominate public policy. The assertion is that these amorphous collections of actors—not formal policy-making institutions in government—control policy. State agencies may place some imprimatur on the policy, so the argument goes, but the real action occurs within the private sector. Further, in the more extreme versions of the argument, if governments attempt to impose control over policy, these networks have sufficient resiliency and capacity for self-organization. (Peters & Pierre, 1998, 225)

In *The Future of Governing* Peters described, before the emergence of the Internet, alternative macro-models of governance that he saw emerging. They were: (i) *The Market Government Model* where policy making and deliberation is achieved through internal markets and market incentives; (ii) *The Participative Government Model*, "almost the ideological antithesis of the market approach" (1996, p. 47) where there is removal of hierarchical top-down controls and policy making is accomplished through consultation and

negotiation; (iii) *The Flexible Government Model* where policy making is accomplished through experimentation; and (iv) *The Deregulated Government Model* where policy making is achieved through entrepreneurial government.

The move towards a Participatory Model of governance, however, has not come from public administration or from government, despite the initial assumptions about the end point of e-government coming from the public sector itself. Indeed, interestingly, e-government has stalled and its discursive practices shifted to records management, public dataset manipulation and persuasion.

Government Driven E-Government

David Coursey (Coursey 2005; Coursey & Norris, 2009) has provided interesting insights into what has in practice happened within e-government in terms of adoption of technologies and techniques and expectations of transformation of government practices internally and outwardly. Table 1 is an adaptation of Coursey and Norris's (2009) summary of expectations about transformation of government because of e-government. As you can see, the universal expectation was transformation of government practice from the adoption of technologies for the delivery of government services online towards participatory government of some kind.

However, Coursey and Norris in their empirical work found that there was in fact little transformation. Indeed, the adoption of e-government services has slowed considerably and, in some areas, seems to have halted.

The findings support the models in that most local governments have adopted e-government, at least at the basic level predicted by models, and have done so in a very short period of time. The findings raise questions about the models in that they are clearly at odds with the models' predictions that governments will move stepwise toward the adoption of more sophisticated e-government offerings, moving from information to transactions to integration and ultimately to transformation. This predicted movement is not happening, or if it is, the

movement is glacial in its speed. Another important finding from these data is that few governments reported any changes that are attributable to e-government, especially changes involving cost impacts. And not all the reported changes were positive, even though positive change is an important part of the mantra surrounding e-government and is clearly expected by the models. (Coursey & Norris 2009).

Table 1 – Assumptions about transformation of e-government over time

Step 1	Emerging presence; email and internal networks
Step 2	Catalogue, presence, enhance presence, information dissemination
Step 3	Transaction, interaction, interactive, two-way communication
Step 4	Vertical integration, transaction, transactional government, integration, Exchange of value
Step 5	Horizontal integration, transformation, seamless, transaction, digital democracy
Step 5	Participation, joined up government

If we turn to the United States Government policy and actions then we find how the discursive practices in contemporary government have changed on e-government and how those practices are likely to shape the future. The US Office of Management and Budget. (2009) FY 2008 Report to Congress on Implementation of The E-Government Act of 2002 demonstrates the parameters that governments are putting on e-government:

Effective management of information resources requires programs designed to disseminate and provide the public with access to government information. The Federal Government continues to improve the methods by which government information is disseminated and made available to the public. By utilizing Federal agency public websites and partnership agreements to complement effective Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) operations, agencies can

maximize the usefulness of their information while minimizing the costs for the American taxpayer.

This is a definition of e-government that focuses on the provision of information to the public, not the engagement of the public with public administration through technology. The Office of Management and Budget points out that the US has embraced the usefulness of USA.gov and in 2008, it received 116 million visits during the year, or 2.2 million visits per week. USA.gov, the Office also says, received national recognition for the quality and effectiveness in providing government information to the public including Time Magazine listing it as one of the “25 Sites We Can’t Live Without.” Examples of information provision include:

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) allowing public access to resource materials relative to VBA. <http://www.vba.va.gov/>;

The Small Business Administration (SBA) providing the news media and the general public with access to information regarding SBA programs and activities through the SBA Newsroom online portal. <http://www.sba.gov/news/>; and

The Department of Education with a one-stop system for ordering Department publications provided at no cost. <http://edpubs.ed.gov/webstore/Content/search.asp>.

More complex provision of public information comes through US sites like data.gov with its motto “Discover, Participate, Engage”. It provides what it calls high value, machine readable datasets generated by the Executive Branch of the Federal Government. Mashups are possible from these datasets, for examples taking data about recreations sites and modifying them for customised used in your holiday planning or for others holiday planning.

The authors do not doubt that efficient provision of information is important. The current approach in the US though, as an example, is to stop e-government at information provision. Ironically, Obama came to the Presidency on the back of highly motivated Internet users organized by Obama's team in complex use of the fans in promoting the Presidential campaign. Table 1 shows the success of the Obama social media use, compared with his competitor McCain.

Table 1 – Obama versus McCain

	Obama	McCain
Post political content online	26%	15%
Engage politically on an online social network	25%	16%
Share photos, video or audio content	21%	16%
Sign up online for election updates	18%	9%
Donate money online	15%	6%
Sign up for email news alerts	12%	8%
Volunteer online	11%	4%

Source: PEW Internet Life Project

The Obama campaign, however, is not an example of citizen engagement in policy deliberation. It is promotions. The US Government has not and will not deploy social media as a mechanism for citizen engagement. Where Obama has used Facebook as President, the Presidential Records Act requires all documentary materials related to the presidential office be saved on paper for posterity. Government web masters have to sit and print snapshots of their websites on paper. Blog comments and status updates on Facebook for instance have to be printed. This type of limitation looks innocuous on the surface, but such laws make it prohibitive to do anything dynamic. Federal US laws limit use of social media because of recognition of issues of liability. Those who sign up to social media take the full risk of

consequences of their actions or actions taken on their behalf with a social media site.

The US Federal Government has used and is planning to deploy social media for Perception Management purposes – for example, black PSYOPS. The very idea of Mass Interpersonal Persuasion (MIP), coined by Fogg (2007), provides insights into strategies for persuasion. Perception Management involves development of persuasion campaigns to sway domestic and international audiences on particular topics. Black PSYOPS is the covert side of Perception Management. Domestic astroturfing by the military, for instance, would count as Black PSYOPS because the public is not aware of the true nature of the demand made upon them. Deceiving the domestic US public, of course, is not new, with the Hill & Knowlton campaign on Kuwait being the most famous (Balnaves, Donald & Shoesmith 2008).

The current situation, therefore, is one where e-government and e-governance as participation have parted waves. The components of modern e-government include:

- E-government as records management;
- E-government as enhancement of access to and manipulating of existing data;
- E-government as Perception Management.

No doubt in the US there may be an expectation that social media will become an important part of the operations of government. This is unlikely. The drivers of e-governance have come not from government but from citizens and media.

Media Driven E-Governance

Interest, pressure or activist groups have been very successful in incorporating the tools of social media into their strategies. Greenpeace and PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of

Animals) are two good global examples. Greenpeace International is a non-government global environmental activist organization with over 2.9 million supporters worldwide. It was created in 1971 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada and is now run from Amsterdam, Netherlands. Its mission involves intervention, stopping practices it considers wrong, and persuasion, encouraging people to change their attitudes and behaviours towards the environment. The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), also activist, and with 2 million members is the largest animal rights organization in the world. Created in 1980 in Norwalk, Virginia, US, its mission is to end all animal exploitation. Like Greenpeace its strategies involve intervention and persuasion. Table 2 provides a summary in 2009 of their respective campaigns and use of social media.

Table 2 – Greenpeace and PETA Use of Social Media

	Greenpeace	PETA
Web site	<p>http://www.greenpeace.org/international</p> <p>Donate funds, sign up for e-mailing list, find out how to get involved, watch videos on Greenpeace TV, follow blog, read international Greenpeace news, shop online store, play games, watch ship webcams, participate in online discussion forums, access reports, discover Greenpeace career opportunities, and learn more about Greenpeace</p>	<p>http://www.peta.org</p> <p>Read news headlines, watch PETA TV, become a member, find information on how to live a cruelty-free lifestyle, support specific campaigns, discover ways to help, subscribe to e-news, read news releases, download resources, and connect to social networking sites</p>
Blog	<p>“Making Waves”</p> <p>Est. February 2006</p> <p>Nine blog contributors</p>	<p>“The PETA Files”</p> <p>Est. October 2006</p> <p>12 blog contributors</p>

	Updated several times weekly	Updated several times daily
Facebook Page	229,713 fans*	198,420 fans*
MySpace	12,711 friends*	39,225 friends*
Twitter	5,489 followers* 757 updates*	14,243 followers* 4,395 updates*
Flickr	443 contacts* 168 posted items*	2,932 contacts* 1,295 posted items*
YouTube	Greenpeace TV channel Joined: October 13, 2006 Subscribers: 10,208* Channel Views: 218,114* 185 posted videos*	PETA TV channel Joined: February 07, 2009 Subscribers: 8,762* Channel Views: 200,237* 238 posted videos*
Featured Campaign	GreenMyApple, 2007 Goal: Pressure Apple to improve electronic waste policies and practices via GreenMyApple.org	GoVeg 2007 Goal: Promote vegetarianism via GoVeg.com

Source: Tran 2009.

Greenpeace and PETA are deploying social media for persuasion and promotions. It has been very active in organizations or protests, even those not directly related to its brief. However, its rules for collaborative participation are not as sophisticated as those of knitting group Ravelry. *Ravelry* is a social networking site for knitters, spinners, and dyers, operated by two young enthusiasts. The site with over 400,000 members allows for commercial as well as non-commercial exchanges and brings together learning, friendship and gifting (Humphries 2009). There have emerged communicative spaces where the medium, the learning

environments in which citizens learn to use the medium and the social capital uses to which the medium come together in complex and seemingly contradictory arrangements.

It could be argued that *Ravelry* takes advantage of friendship to promote commercial transactions. However, if we shift our gaze to the issue of resource allocation within particular activities of *Ravelry* we find that there are specific rules for collaborative decision-making, the sharing of information and action. Resource allocation decisions made by governments have no participatory aspect outside the form voting cycle. “Consultation” often as not involves seeking comment. There is no means and no expectation that citizens will actually deliberate on resource allocation decisions and have a genuine effect. E-governance as it is evolving within the Internet is in fact providing a guide to:

- Collaborative rules for sharing information
- Collaborative rules for running and managing the communicative spaces
- Social capital and mobilisation of resources for action

The authors argue that some of these groups are becoming so big and so sophisticated in their e-governance practices that simply by virtue of size and economy they will impact directly on public sector policy making. Deliberative democracy has now moved from political theory into innovation in the real world. This deliberative revolution in institutional practice has involved practitioners in many countries devising innovative ways to involve citizens in effective deliberation and joint decision-making. Relevant innovations include consensus conferences (invented in Denmark), citizens’ juries (invented in the USA, widely used in the UK and sometimes in Australia), planning cells (Germany), participatory budgeting (Brazil), participatory technology assessment of different kinds (Denmark and NZ), deliberative polls (USA, China and Australia), citizen panels (UK), citizens’ assemblies (Canada), citizens

parliament (Australia) and 21st century town meetings (USA, Australia and Europe). Non public-sector non-profit organizations are developing e-governance structures that are taking advantage of the collective intelligence and expertise of a highly educated modern citizenry that dwarfs anything that is done on a small scale by some governments.

Directions for Future Research

There is little modern Internet research devoted to identifying systematic manipulation of the Internet by democratic governments. Modern democratic governments and their intelligence and security offices have social media at the top of their agenda. The authors in this paper have argued that modern e-government discursive practices have gone from one of transformation of government into more open boundaries towards closure. High quality delivery of information is on the government agendas, but not openness. Indeed, even in Europe where openness is set as a key principle, there is still no government that is developing a platform that links citizens to government in deliberation on resource allocation. The authors suggest that it is important to focus research on:

—Study of citizens/municipalities who are, in fact, involved joint decision-making and where resource allocation is part of the process;

—Study of the discursive practices and governance structures best suited for equitable and non-coercive decision-making being developed by groups on the Internet and where resource allocation is involved;

—Study of systematic manipulation of social media by formal authorities.

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