

Information Communication Technology and Participatory Democracy - Greater Nottingham 2010

Moira Whelan and Joanne Herlihy

Introduction

Democracy - what does it mean today?

"Information technology is revolutionising our lives, including the way we work, the way we communicate and the way we learn. The information age offers huge scope for organising government activities in new, innovative and better ways and for making life easier for the public by providing public services in integrated, imaginative and more convenient forms like single gateways, the Internet and digital TV". (Modernising Government 1999)

Renewal of democracy covers a range of engagements from encouraging participation in the political process to gaining public views on service delivery. This chapter draws up a balance sheet to assist an understanding of how trends may develop over the forthcoming period.

The first task is to outline some of the many opportunities presented by developments in Information Communication Technologies (ICT). We will draw on examples from Nottinghamshire where possible, but primarily draw on national developments given that success for local initiatives is often dependent on national activity. We then present some social research findings and a selection of views from political commentators, which suggest that a number of riders exist on the success ICT will have on increasing democratic participation.

The impacts and benefits of ICT

It is argued by Government that participation by the public in aspects of government will increase with the employment of new technologies. As in business, the internet, e-commerce and cheaper costs of telecommunication are transforming the way in which organisations and individuals communicate.

Customer or client input and control regarding service delivery and political process mechanisms, are said to be enhanced with use of the new avenues for interaction (e-channels). These channels include the world wide web, internet, mobile phones, interactive TV and kiosks. There are many new opportunities which individuals can take advantage of. The ability of individuals and groups to publicise and promote their own ideas and views can be enhanced with on-line publishing of newspapers and newsletters. The capacity to collect, synthesise and manipulate greater volumes of information at a much faster speed could create better-informed citizens. Geographical barriers for consultation, discussion and accessing information could be reduced.

There are other advantages: for example, new technology can offer a degree of anonymity and reduce stigma. To illustrate, nearly 1000 women who experienced domestic violence took part in an e-mail based private consultation exercise with women practitioners and MPs. These experiences were then used to inform a report and the Government's strategy on tackling domestic violence. (Kable.net.com February 2000).

Overall, it is argued that ICT can offer many new routes by which the public can achieve an active relationship with decision-making. Practically, these developments offer a number of possibilities for empowering individuals to participate and consult.

Forcing the pace of change - Government targets

The Government has an ambitious programme for modernising the way the business of government is conducted. They are setting out a programme of change allowing more informal ways for people to express their views. The 1998 White Paper, 'Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People', provides an agenda to deepen and extend local democracy and participation. Objectives include providing new political management structures to enhance visibility and accountability, new forms of direct democracy including referendums, and a greater focus on consulting and involving the electorate, using citizens' juries and people's panels.

ICT forms an integral part of this programme and there are a number of rigorous service delivery targets in place for central government to achieve and local government to consider.

These targets include:

- ❖ **April 2000** - publication of strategic direction for the way the public sector will transform itself by implementing business models which exploit new technologies;
- ❖ **By 2005** – all citizens should have access to the internet – whether in their own homes or through community access points;
- ❖ **By 2005** – all dealings with government, where appropriate, to be deliverable electronically;
- ❖ **By 2005** - 25% of Government transactions to be conducted on-line

(http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/moderngov/1999/action/anxa_milestones.htm)

The citizen as customer

For government to work, it needs to understand the individuals and organisations it works with and on behalf of. Every time a person interacts with any part of government they pass on information about themselves. Technology makes it possible to manage this information and use it to shape its strategy to meet customer needs and preferences. Successful organisations are responsive to customer's opinions and messages.

Responsiveness is seen to have a strong effect upon 'customer' attitude. In business, marketing of products is key to their success. Businesses use the information that the customer gives them to develop their products. They constantly analyse customer attitudes, perceptions and preferences and adjust their product accordingly. The customer is king and solutions are customer focused. The Government is moving towards implementing a programme to deliver the goal of understanding 'customer' needs. They have lessons to learn about the principles of customer relationship management (CRM) from a range of service industries including banking and retail.

ICT can also be a powerful service delivery mechanism for government. Any shifts in their strategic policy agenda to more customer focused solutions need to be matched by a change in the way services are delivered.

The **BIG report** on Citizens' preferences (March 2000) asserts that people feel confused and ill-informed about public services:-

"The goals of empowerment, choice, accountability and participation, depend on information and advice. But information alone is not enough. Support services are needed to add value to information through analysis, interpretation and advice."

The report spells out the requirements for 'new ways of doing business'. Public services are under pressure to improve efficiency. ICT and modern management techniques can facilitate this improvement. However, these approaches need to be customised to meet the needs of the public sector. Many public services are complex and making changes is difficult because of the inter-relationships between public service providers. The BIG report states that business process re-engineering and new technologies can assist in simplifying processes and "even where this is not possible, better interfaces can ameliorate the difficulties".

The report suggests that there is also a need for standards against which performance can be compared and which can provide the government, service providers and the public with clear indicators of what can be expected. These standards would "offer a way of proving best value - but basic information needs to be processed so that it is easy to use." Whilst major efforts are being made to mirror aspects of private sector business, the resource requirements are enormous and clear benefits in efficiency and improved service delivery need justification. Their propositions focus on service delivery but are equally relevant to the actual attempt to reinvigorate democratic activity and public engagement.

Voter turnout and participation

"All around us the world is being revolutionised by the net. Why not politics?" (Margaret Moran MP – Kablet February 2000)

Recent media polls and studies appear to support the contention that there is general optimism and support for trying out new ways of encouraging turnout and that, in theory, voting is the right thing to do.

An interactive questionnaire on the Nottinghamshire County Council website during local democracy week (1999) served as a 'vox pop' giving people the chance to comment on current voting arrangements and give a view on potential changes such as weekend ballots, electronic voting etc. Results on voter turnout indicated that this could be increased by measures such as compulsory voting or making Councillors more active in the local community.

Also, in Nottinghamshire, a questionnaire on opinions of young people was undertaken in 1998 and again in 1999. This was then followed by 6 focus groups in August 1999. These initiatives aimed to generate quantitative and qualitative information on what would make local democracy more attractive to younger people. Findings indicated that extending the opportunities for the way young people vote, such as supermarket voting, voting over more than one day, voting by post, phone or the internet, are likely to increase voter turnout. (Henn, Weinstein and Wring 1999).

A MORI survey undertaken for the Local Government Association examined reasons for non-voting in local elections and again, expanding voting methods suggested probable higher turnout:-

- ❖ 54% would be more likely to vote if they could do this via telephone
- ❖ 31% would be more likely to vote if they could do so via digital TV and internet (usage of which since the survey has now significantly increased. (LGA in 1999).

In 1994 Lewisham Council introduced 'Lewisham Listens' out of concern for increased disengagement experienced in reduced voter turnout, especially among the young. The initiative used the interactive technology of video conferencing and 'video booths' (not unlike instant photo booths) to promote feedback and involvement. Their findings broke some popular myths since the technology was well received amongst disadvantaged and minority groups and they were well represented during the exercise.

There are a range of examples where attempts have been made to test out if new technologies actually make a difference when voting day comes. West Lothian Council experimented with voting via touch screen technology with increased turnout and claimed a reduction in costs (Local Government Chronicle 18.12.98). More informal voting arrangements have been piloted using supermarkets and petrol stations as polling stations.

Consultation mechanisms are said to complement voting and there is encouragement for local authorities to do this. For example, Lewisham pilot 'Dialogue' linked 65 members of their citizens' panel to the internet to experiment with on-line debate and consultation. They had access to bulletin boards and asked questions to the Leader and Chief Executive. A parallel project is being developed in schools to debate citizenship issues (see www.lewisham.gov.uk/dialogue).

In the international arena, voting in the Democratic Party's presidential primary in Arizona in March 2000, was the world's first political election held on the internet. Almost 36,000 internet votes were placed, three times the turnout of the previous election. Internet voting is legal in France and one city is already considering an internet election. Some countries have held small-scale ballots and consultation exercises on the internet. The Amsterdam digital city project was developed with the municipal authority and offered dial-up access, either from private, personal computers or from public terminals. The project has supported referendum activities and there are now more than 25 digital cities in the Netherlands.

Kitting out the politicians

In addition to examples on voting and consultation exercises, there are measures underway to 'skill-up' Members of Parliament and councillors to assist them gain views from the public. The recent launch of YouGov.com, an e-democracy website and on-line campaigning tool for councillors, is an example of the use of ICT for democratic participation. The 'organisers' claim that this website has no political agenda other than

promoting open and accessible democracy at national and local levels. The board includes representatives from the major political parties and includes a complete UK political news briefing with the facility for users to vote on every issue. The site is supported by a team of journalists working 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to provide summaries of newspaper articles, broadcast media and the internet.

Future developments will include: -

- ❖ the People's Parliament, allowing users to vote on the same issues as MPs, with results e-mailed to all MPs an hour before they vote (and users getting back full results the next morning);
- ❖ 'GovDoctor' - a 'logic tree' which identifies many of the problems people have with local and national government, identifying the person directly responsible for that issue in the user's locality - with an immediate email facility;
- ❖ easy access to local government transactions (for example, users will be able to pay their community charge on-line);
- ❖ a 'citizens' panel' to poll people on the local issues that affect their daily lives.

The site will also feature a Grassroots campaigning facility, extending the 'People's Parliament' to local councils, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, and the Greater London Authority. People can find out the issues being decided by their local and regional government and register their vote prior to those decisions being made. Local councillors will be offered a page, on which they can post information and access the ability to e-mail personal messages to all users in their ward. Users will also have access to a variety of forms of grassroots campaigning. They will find, identified for them, the local and national pressure groups, charities and political organisations active in their area.

There is also a drive to wire-up Whitehall and bring Parliament, and the council chamber, into homes, schools and colleges. This offers some interesting possibilities including viewing government business on video and interactive select committee websites. Public broadcast of committee business is being trialed by at least one Nottinghamshire council. The Welsh Assembly's intranet, 'Chamberweb', frees elected members from the task of taking papers into the Chamber as all necessary documents are available on their intranet and members can vote electronically.

ICT can make services more accessible, speedy, 'open', better value for money, better co-ordinated, sophisticated, transparent, accountable with access to public records, reports and committee papers. The Government Secure Intranet (GSI) is a means of securing exchange of electronic communications between government departments. The technology used is similar to the technology used for the Internet. Initially the GSI will offer interdepartmental and external e-mail, web access, internal publishing within government, and a directory of civil servants. In the future, the GSI could support dealing with Parliamentary Questions and provide support for cross-departmental groups and a gateway to allow members of the public to submit electronic forms to departments.

An online survey, conducted by IBM for the Institute for Electronic Government (IEG), found that 74% of Europe's 'e-politicians' believe that IT has the capacity to enhance democracy with 50% supporting a move to introduce on-line voting alongside traditional methods. However, in the UK only 27% of MPs participated in the survey with only 25% of MPs listing their e-mail address on the UK Parliamentary web page. This, propose the authors, suggests that our politicians might not be ready for the imminent 'step change' that digital media will bring to politics.

2010 - The bigger picture

The above provides much evidence of the substantial energy being expended on finding ways to use ICT to encourage public participation and interaction with new service delivery mechanisms and political processes. However, targets and objective setting alone are not sufficient to assess whether there will be a renewal in democratic participation. Caution is required before embarking down this path uncritically. It is worth outlining some key features of the current period as expectations, experience and

real disappointments need to be taken into account as information and technology cannot, alone, inspire and reinvigorate democracy.

The technology

What technical requirements would society need for success to be reflected?

- ❖ cost is no longer an issue with most homes equipped with computers purchased through interest free loans
- ❖ technical problems are a thing of the past and embarrassments such as the breakdown of electronic counting equipment during the year 2000 election for London Mayor no longer occur
- ❖ security and authentication issues are solved (eg with fingerprint and retina identification commonplace)
- ❖ privacy concerns are resolved and the public is confident that their personal data is only being used for the purpose they intended
- ❖ access to digital services, for example via television, is available countrywide and to uniform standards
- ❖ every community has a range of access points in schools, libraries and shops and there is always someone on hand, 'virtually' or otherwise, to assist with usage.

Strategic considerations

In addition to overcoming technical hurdles, there are other strategic considerations. Focusing on stimulating public engagement must consider content and outcomes. Without these elements driving developments, any strategy will be impoverished. People need to see results to convince them to offer their allegiance. In turn, they need to feel that they have a stake in the process.

Technology can have many positive effects as it can, in some circumstances, assist some people to overcome aspects of isolation and provide much needed channels of communication. Video conferencing with signing for people with hearing impairment, digital delivery to the housebound and telephone enquiries for people with literacy difficulties are just some examples.

The proliferation of mobile phones across all sections of society and the potential this technology has for connection to the world wide web, allows for many more people to access relatively inexpensive methods of communication technologies. The national initiatives and resource input into education and library services may also alleviate some of the barriers to communication and participation through increased learning and local access points.

However, people have differing levels of access to technical communication tools. This 'exclusion' may be by virtue of income, geography, literacy or special needs or because they have a lack of IT skills. Policy makers and information providers must be aware of this potential danger and address the need to keep all sections of the community equally informed and equally 'accessible'. Many people feel estranged from the process. It is difficult to feel included if you are unemployed, a low paid worker, faced with a language barrier, or simply unhappy with the choices on offer. It is vital to make sure that certain sections of the public are not left behind in the enthusiasm to modernise.

'The Net Result', a publication from the National Working Party on Social Exclusion in the Information Society, suggests that an inclusive society would be required to:

- ❖ stimulate and support engagement between members of communities
- ❖ offer ready, easy to read public access to communication channels without heavy dependency on intermediaries
- ❖ provide information for full participation available free at the point of delivery
- ❖ make substantial investment in information handling and communication skills for all to raise awareness levels
- ❖ enhance people's ability to discriminate and exploit large quantities of information

Social and political considerations

Finally, we need to include in our assessment some fairly difficult problems the current period raises so that a balanced view can be gained on the current discussions on change. Three areas present themselves for some examination. The first is to look at voting patterns, as this is one of the areas where it became clear that the public was losing interest in political processes.

a) Voting

Examples of trends in voting patterns illustrate some of the current challenges. *"Their [local people] lack of interest in local government is reflected in the low turnouts at local elections; Britain trails behind most developed nations with an average of just 40 per cent of the electorate casting their vote. Indeed, in the 1998 local elections, turnout reached no more than 30 per cent on average (Rallings and Thrasher, 1998), and turnout in 1999 was similarly low"* (Rao & Young pp 45)

Of those who didn't vote in local elections, a 1998 Mori survey found that one in five said they didn't believe voting in local elections would make a difference to local taxes and services. One in ten agreed with the statement "My vote doesn't make any difference" and "none of the parties stands for policies I would like to see" (LGA 1999)

There is also great concern regarding the low voting levels of young people.

"Teenagers' levels of political interest – already low in 1994 – have fallen still further. Over a third of young people now claim to have no interest in politics at all, a rise of seven points since 1994. A further third have 'not very much' interest, leaving only one in three teenagers who claim to have any interest at all." (Park 1999)

The picture for national elections reflects the same trend with the turnout for the 1997 general election being 71 per cent – the lowest level since World War ii. (University of Plymouth cited in Taylor 2000) Even reform of national institutions has not had a dramatic effect in re-enthusing the public. Matthew Taylor, Director of the IPPR, addresses the discrepancy between the luke-warm reception New Labour receives today with the enthusiastic response welcoming their victory in 1997 and the potential which was held out to the electorate with their programme for reform. In a recent pamphlet for the Local Government Association he said:

"Three years on there is a striking contrast between Labour's success in creating new political processes and institutions, and its apparent failure to create a new political culture in which these can thrive. We have a parliament in Scotland, assembly in Wales, hereditary peers out of the Lords, a Human Rights Act on the statute book, a Freedom of Information Bill in parliament, and a directly elected London Mayor. But whether it is measured in the desultory turn out for European, local government and Welsh assembly elections, in the internal selection machinations of the Labour Party or in the return of a general sense of cynicism and disengagement with politics, the new day of 2 May 1997 seems a distant memory." (Taylor 2000)

It is not yet clear whether new electronic initiatives to increase voter turnout are having the desired impact on turning this trend around. For example, the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions has produced a research study (DETR 2000) which shows that despite many experiments with e-democracy, such as electronic registration, telephone voting, combined with other initiatives and local consultation, there has not been any noticeable increase in voter turnout.

There are other factors which mean that attempts to increase turnout through e-voting is likely to remain slow. These are: changes to voting processes require new legislation and significant spending for the goals to be realised; political and practical hurdles exist including the creation of an electronic register of voters; and fears that the technology is not sufficiently robust. In the interim, a change of outlook is required to prepare the ground for more widespread use of ICT in 'political' activity:

- ❖ awareness building of the benefits offered by ICT;
- ❖ expansion and development of the IT skills of citizens;
- ❖ provision of an infrastructure and culture to support its use;
- ❖ strategies reflecting the implications for organisational structure and operations;
- ❖ co-ordination of activity to avoid isolated islands of success;

In addition, internet elections do not save money as, for the foreseeable future, internet polls will run in parallel with polling stations. However, is it worth paying for extra participation? Is there justification for large scale investment when only part of the community benefits?

How people vote

It is not simply that voting levels have steadily declined. How people vote is also changing. Loyalties do not generally hold and younger people are displaying worrying signs of a distancing themselves from politics. A commentary examining the voting patterns following the May 2000 election said:

"Thursday's elections provide clear evidence of the new face of electoral politics. Gone is the notion of voting as a civic duty. Gone, too, is unquestioning loyalty to political parties. Electors now vote only if they have a point to make or if they consider the election to be relevant to their lives. And when they vote, they act like consumers in choosing the party considered to be best placed to achieve the desired outcome." (Rallings and Thrasher 2000)

Previously held assumptions about traditional loyalties and ties simply do not entice the electorate. Furthermore, new groups and bodies, such as consumer and environmental groups, have emerged to fill the vacuum left by traditional politics.

"Furedi (1999) suggests that the citizen frustrated and disengaged from the process is increasingly turning to consumer activists to represent their interests, despite the fact that these activists are neither democratically representative or accountable and as such can themselves contribute to processes of exclusion." (Taylor 2000)

There is also uncertainty and confusion.

"Somewhat paradoxically, the level of intention to vote in the next national parliamentary election is very high (83.7 per cent), although our survey respondents are unsure which political party they will support in the contest." (Henn, Weinstein & Wring 1999)

"In all instances where it is possible to monitor change over time, teenagers and young adults have moved away from an involvement in conventional politics. They are, for instance, less interested than they were four years earlier, less knowledgeable, and less likely to have formed an attachment to any party." (Park 1999)

b) Trust, association and social relationships

Underpinning the problem of decline in voting patterns, there appears to be a weakening of the spontaneous bonds and connections which individuals traditionally made between each other. Lack of trust extends beyond that towards politicians. The following extracts from research examine the levels to which individuals associate on a regular basis, how much they trust one another and the extent to which they engage in community affairs (termed 'social capital' by Hall).

"Although aggregate levels of social capital and political engagement in Britain remain high, they are distributed very unevenly across the population. For the most part, political activism and the associational life that sustains it have remained middle-class phenomena in Britain and the preserve of those in middle age." (Hall 1999) (see also Johnston & Jowell 1999)

Hall goes on to explain, *"The two groups left out of civic society and increasingly marginalised from it are the working class and the young. In 1959, those in the working class belonged on average to about 62 per cent as many formal associations as those in the middle class, but by 1990 this figure was down to 45 per cent. Those aged 30 and under belonged to about 84 per cent as many associations as those over that age in 1959, but in 1990 they belonged to only 75 per cent as many ... discrepancies in levels of social trust between such groups have also widened."* (Hall 1999)

These trends indicate that there does not appear to have been a significant decline in the total number of people who participate in some form of associational activity, but the social make up is shifting towards the middle class and older age groups. The **nature** of the activity has also changed dramatically and is less likely to result in the development of strong social relationships. Hall indicates a shift away from organisations dedicated to the public interest in favour of those that service more narrow individual purposes.

c) Politics get technical

Political representatives appear uncertain on how to best resolve the combined effects of

a decline in voting and the unravelling of the strong social bonds. There is much energy being expended in rejuvenating democracy but it is often focused on the more technical delivery mechanisms rather than the policy and legislative programme which underpin these. Tyrell and Goodhart explain how this shift in political life appears to them:

"...in a less ideological age governments justify what they do not by demonstrating how the [sic] actions are consistent with their fundamental creed (which only believers can judge), but on the basis of results (which, in theory, everyone can judge). But this technocratic source of legitimacy is looking tarnished, too." (Tyrell & Goodhart 1998)

It would seem that TINA (There Is No Alternative), rather than Maggie, John, William or Tony, has been most influential in re-orientating how people now regard political life. Personality, as in the London Mayor election, rather than policy, has come to the fore. Managerialism and more technical, process driven discussions tend to dominate discussion over and above ideas and debate. Inevitably, individuals are influenced by much narrower concerns and with more limited horizons regarding their own role in political life.

Conclusions

There are many excellent applications and opportunities presented by the new developments in ICT. The degree of experimentation and energy currently being invested in developing mechanisms to increase participatory democracy represents a clear attempt to find new ways to lock the public into engagement with the many new initiatives currently being undertaken within politics, community action and service delivery. We have also indicated that many other factors have to be addressed before many of these advances are likely to come to fruition.

- ❖ We have illustrated with some research that it is not yet possible to indicate whether new methods already being used will resolve the contemporary problem of lack of engagement;
- ❖ New ways to vote does not resolve the confusion people have of who to vote for;
- ❖ Consultation and testing of public opinion, however this is conducted, assumes that a consensus on substantive issues already exists;
- ❖ High tech new methods of conducting politics are appealing due precisely to their being new. Dependence on these tends, however, to reveal that representatives lack confidence and need to seek approval on all aspects of government business. This can reinforce uncertainty;
- ❖ The focus on more technical aspects of government processes can be counter-productive as it narrows the field of political life.

Our balance sheet suggests a picture of the many possibilities which ICT opens up for new methods of participation by the public in areas of service delivery and in democratic processes. This future is also shaped by past experiences and some fairly fundamental disappointments are now manifesting themselves. It may be too early to judge what the resolution to this current situation will be. However, we hope our chapter has presented some useful material and raised some pertinent questions to inform future discussions.

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