Chapter 12

Consulting the British Public in the Digital Age:
Technological Innovation and Internet Addiction in the Web 2.0 Era

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, public confidence and trust in Government has declined visibly in several liberal democracies; giving way instead to disillusionment with current political institutions, actors, and practices, and rendering obsolete or inappropriate much of traditional democratic politics. Simultaneously, digital technologies have opened up huge opportunities and raised new challenges for public institutions and agencies. Through an analysis of the No. 10 Downing Street ePetitions Initiative based in the United Kingdom, this chapter will engage with issues related to the innovative use of digital network technology by Government to involve citizens in policy processes within existing democratic frameworks. The work examines whether the application of new digital platforms to participatory democracy in the Government 2.0 era leads eventually to radical transformations in government functioning and the body politic, or merely to modest, unspectacular political reform and to the emergence of technology-based pathologies and addictive behaviours amongst individuals in society.

INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, there has been increased questioning of traditional democratic politics in Western liberal democracies, largely due to a decline in and a lack of opportunity for public participation in these processes. Such concerns are largely thought to be embodied in (amongst other phenomena) low voter turnout during elections; a trend particularly noticeable amongst young people where only half of those eligible to vote actually do so (The Electoral Commission Report, 2005). This is especially worrying and problematic for governments, as it speaks of growing political apathy and a broader, more general disillusionment with current political institutions, actors and practices. Whilst it is impossible to

comprehensively untangle all the reasons for the decline in civic participation in these countries, there is little doubt that many citizens feel distanced from any sense of political relevance or power, often under the impression that not only will their votes and individual voices be drowned out in the clamour of the crowd, but that the rules which govern their daily lives are drawn up by politicians and bureaucrats whom they will never meet and who are usually extremely difficult to contact (Eggers, 2005).

Leading commentators have described the political processes and institutions integral to Western democracies as undergoing what has been variously described as 'a crisis of legitimacy', a 'credibility crisis' or a 'crisis of democracy' (cf. Habermas, 1985, Archibugi & Held, 1995), and are fast reaching agreement that the fundamental flaw lies in traditional decision-making practices which are, in their current form, often democratically inadequate as they fail to provide extensive and relatively equal opportunities for citizens, communities and groups to contribute towards the shaping of decision-making agendas (Sclove 1995). The focus of discourse and scholarly activity, both in academic and policy circles, has thus gradually shifted away from a more centralised, top-down conception of 'government' – those formal institutions and processes which operate at the level of the nation state to maintain public order and facilitate collective action (Stoker, 1998) – towards the notions of 'governance', an idea which, while traditionally a synonym for government, has been captured in recent theoretical work as signifying 'a change in the meaning of government referring to a new process of governing; or a changed condition of ordered rule; or the new method by which society is governed' (Rhodes, 1996: 652).

Governance is thus seen to be ultimately concerned with crafting the conditions for ordered rule and collective action, or 'the creation of a structure or an order which cannot be externally imposed, but which is the result of the interaction of a multiplicity of governing and each other influencing actors' (Kooiman & Van Vliet, 1993: 64), and is thus a conceptual way of capturing shifts in the character of political rule which has been stretched to encompass a range of different transformations including an emphasis on drawing citizens and communities into the process of collaborative participation in political processes and the creation of new forms of governable subjects (Newman, 2005).

This chapter aims to assess, through the use of a relevant exploratory case study, whether the innovative use of network technology (in particular the Internet and its associated applications) in the Government 2.0 era would, in attempting to involve citizens in policy processes within existing democratic frameworks, eventually lead to radical transformations in government functioning, policymaking, and the *body politic*, or merely to modest political reform and to the emergence of obsessive-compulsive technology-based pathologies and Internet-based addictions amongst individuals in society. In doing so, it seeks to explore the factors, particularly those rooted in a country's legal and institutional foundations, that might hinder or enable the successful implementation of e-consultation projects at different levels of government and develop a set of recommendations for overcoming any barriers encountered. The main idea behind Government 2.0 is participation by citizens, through the use of Web 2.0 Technologies, a term referring to the collection of social media through which individuals are active participants in creating, organizing, editing, combining, sharing, commenting, and rating Web content as well as forming a social network through interacting and linking to each other.

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