Chapter XI
Australia Local Government and E-Governance: From Administration to Citizen Participation?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses local government’s response to the pressure to modernise its structures through its use of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) to execute its broad range of tasks. The chapter begins by discussing Chadwick and May’s (2003) three basic models of e-government; managerial, consultative and participatory. Using data collected from an analysis of 658 local government websites in Australia together with existing survey research the chapter then analyses the extent to which local government sites fit into the three models. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the issues and problems faced by local government in its attempt to develop e-governance as both an extension of administrative as well as democratic functions.

INTRODUCTION

Like many other institutions of governance around the world, Australia’s local governments are facing new challenges in the 21st century. The pressure for reform has seen major structural changes as state and federal governments seek to impose a new economic and political agenda upon the local institutions of governance (Baker, 2003). The result has seen a renewed focus on way that local government does business especially in areas such as statutory service obligations, financial accountability, local economic development and to a lesser extent democratic representation (Dolbery, Marshall, & Worthington, 2003).

In more recent times local governments have adopted Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in the form of websites in the hope of
expanding their role in the new world of e-government. With large cash injections from the Federal government’s Networking the Nation program and local state programs to improve the reach of ICT, local governments have set about the task of relocating much of their activity online (Macdonald, 2001). The first wave of websites established on the internet and local governments are now in the process of learning how to work in the world of e-government.

As this chapter demonstrates, the first rush of e-government, and for that matter e-governance, has brought mixed results for local government across Australia. Websites exist for most local governments but the types of e-government vary from place to place both within and between the state systems. Following an outline of an analytical framework for understanding e-government the chapter explores the approaches to e-governance adopted across local government in Australia and discusses the major issues that face any future developments.

E-GOVERNMENT

Australian local governments have adopted the Australian Local Government Association’s (ALGA) definition of e-government as ‘the structured use of electronic technology to pursue the traditional goals of government in areas such as:

- The interface with government
- Service relationships with people and businesses
- Commercial relationships with business partners
- Implementing sectoral and community-based policy
- Enhancing the role of citizens in democratic processes (i.e. e-democracy)
- Interacting with other public institutions
- The conduct of government’s own ‘back-office’ operations’ (Australian Local Government Association, 2004, p. 10)

What this list does reaffirm the fundamental role of ‘government’ in interfacing, implementing, conducting and servicing. For all intents and purposes it is business as usual for ‘government’ without a lot of thought about increasing the reach of local democracy (Crabtree, 2001).

On the other hand there are those that consider the shift to e-government as a change to the way that the government and its citizens interact. Chadwick and May (2003) argue that there are three basic models of interaction between the state and its citizens that underpin the notion of e-government: managerial, consultative and participatory. The first approach is akin to the ALGA definition as a managerialist focus. Chadwick and May (2003) argue that the managerialist approach has a number of features:

- “A concern for the ‘efficient’ delivery of services” of government information to citizens and other groups of users.
- The use of ICTs to improve flows of information within and around government.
- A recognition of the importance of ‘service delivery’ to ‘customers’.
- The view that speeding up information provision is, by itself, ‘opening up government’.
- A general absence of user resources issues, such as the ability to receive and interpret information.
- And ‘control’ and presentational professionalism (often termed spin) as defining logics. (Chadwick & May, 2003, p. 272).

The Chief Information Officer for the Government of Canada sums up the managerialist position as:

*The ultimate goal is to use technology to strengthen Canada’s economy and society; reduce the cost*
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