

Extending E-Government and Citizen Participation in Australia through the Internet

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INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to provide a brief overview of the current development of digital democracy in Australia, with emphasis on the use of the Internet to extend and enhance citizen participation. Use of the Internet within the definition of digital democracy proposed is categorized into three overlapping groups: (1) e-government services and administration; (2) participatory technologies; and (3) informal modes of participation.

BACKGROUND

The term “digital democracy” is comparable to virtual democracy, teledemocracy, e-democracy and cyber democracy. Following Kenneth L. Hacker and Jan van Dijk (2000), digital democracy “is the use of ... ICT ... and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in all kinds of media (e.g., the Internet, interactive broadcasting, and digital telephony) for purposes of enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication” (p. 1). Digital democracy is defined by the use of electronic information and communications technologies (ICTs) to extend and/or enhance access to information, and facilitate participation in democratic communities, processes and institutions. Historically, this has included the use of radio, telephone, and televisual media, although during the last ten years, interest in digital democracy has shifted to focus on the use of the Internet.

Despite its comparatively small population of just over 20 million, Australia’s political system has an elaborate structure consisting of local, state and federal levels of government which seek to democratically represent a culturally diverse and geographically dispersed constituency. Consequently, the use of ICT in governance offers particular benefits in the delivery of government information and services. As the following discussion illustrates, the potential benefits of digital democracy have tended to be recognized at state rather than federal levels of government and parliament.

In terms of Internet access, Australians have a relatively high rate of adoption, although according to at least one estimate, Australia’s rate of overall technological access has declined in comparison to other developed nations.¹ By September 2003, more than a quarter of the population (5.2 million) subscribed to the Internet. At the time of writing, the vast majority of Australian users are dial-up subscribers, although this number as a proportion of total subscribers fell below 90% for the first time in 2003, corresponding to an increase in broadband uptake. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), there were over 650,000 broadband subscribers by the end of September 2003. From March to September 2003, Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) subscribers grew by 78% (163,000) (ABS, 2003).

Government Services and Administration

E-government is the most visible dimension of digital democracy in Australia. The importance of developing Web-based technologies for e-governance has been recognized by virtually all states and territories in Australia (Trinitas, 2002). Initiatives, such as the Queensland government’s *e-Democracy Policy Framework* and the Victorian Parliamentary Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee’s *Inquiry into Electronic Democracy*, reflect the growing significance of e-governance in enhancing and extending government information networks and administration of services (Parliament of Victoria, 2004).

Email and databases are now used to coordinate organizational activity, daily government and parliamentary work (Gibson, Ward, Römmele, 2004; Grönlund, 2002). Australian citizens have greater access to information and services, ranging from information about taxation to electoral rules, as well as greater access to observe the activities of democratic representatives via the Internet. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation began audio-streaming a Parliamentary and News Network via its Web site in 1998 (Magarey, 1999). Federal parliament has audio-visually Webcast (otherwise referred to as “netcast”) its parliamentary sessions and committee hearings for

over four years. By 2003, the Australian federal parliament and certain committee activities were Webcast via several simultaneous channels and attracted around 15,000 hits per week during parliamentary sessions (although viewers tended to consist of lobbyists, the media, and public servants) (Parliament of Victoria, 2002c; Adams, 2003). At the state level, Queensland Parliament has also offered limited audio Webcast services (Queensland Parliament, 2004).

It is at the local government level at which Webcasting perhaps offers the most benefit. Some municipal governments in Victoria and New South Wales have streamed council meetings to provide greater opportunity for community involvement in local government by enabling open access from home, as well as promoting a sense of transparency to council meetings. Citizens watch issues of direct interest to them, such as council discussions about pollution levels in their municipality, or for general educative purposes.

Some Webcasts offer viewers the opportunity to interact directly with representatives. Webcast facilities for council meetings in the Wellington Shire of Victoria, for example, include a chat function through which interested people can pose questions at the end of each meeting. Watching an unedited Webcast also has the advantage over reading a transcript of enabling the viewer to experience the tone and bearing of Members of Parliament (MPs) “live” (Adams, 2003). The capacity of electronic media, such as the Web, to enable greater opportunities for interaction with government and broader political participation is a second, albeit underutilized, dimension of digital democracy in Australia.

Use of the Internet to Extend Participation and Citizenship

This second category of digital democracy includes a range of electronically-mediated activities in which individuals, groups and organizations are able to *formally* interact in determining the conditions of their political association. Opportunities to vote electronically (e-voting), engage policy development and debate online are examples of this; but note that I use the adverb “formally” to distinguish legitimate modes of participation from informal activities, such as Hacktivism, which are described in the following paragraphs in further detail as a third category of activity.

Use of the Internet to formally extend the scope and capacity for participation is distinguished from the provision of government information and services by adding the element of interactive communication. Van Dijk provides four categories of interactive communication: allocation (e.g., computerized election campaigns, civil ser-

vice, and information centers); consultation (e.g., Web-based public information); registration (e.g., telepolling or televoting, electronic referenda, and elections) and conversation (e.g., e-mail, bulletin boards, electronic town halls, and discussions) (van Dijk, in Hacker & van Dijk, 2000, p. 40).

The benefits of electronic technology have been recognized by the Victorian Parliament as enabling individuals to engage policy development through improved access to relevant information, more effective methods for the distribution of materials and proposals, and tools for greater collaboration, consensus formation and deliberation free from the constraints of time and space (Parliament of Victoria, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e). The New South Wales government, for example, sponsors a “Community Builders” network of policy implementation, in which an interactive electronic clearing house is available for community level social, economic and environmental renewal (New South Wales Government, 2005). The Queensland Government has established an e-democracy unit responsible for implementing and managing the government’s three e-democracy initiatives to test how information technology can enhance the community’s access to government and participation in government decision-making through online community consultation, broadcast of parliament and e-petitions. The *Citizenscape* Web site of Western Australia promotes active participation in involvement in decision-making and informs about citizenship related activities (Department of the Premier and Cabinet Western Australia, 2005).

Electronic networking has also been used to foster community participation to a limited extent at a Federal level. Magarey (1999) provides the example that during a Federal Parliamentary debate on Native Title (concerning the recognition in Australian law that Indigenous people had a system of law and ownership of their lands prior to European settlement):

One of the benefits a parliamentary democracy may offer is the possibility that its processes of deliberation may build community and engender civic involvement ... Internet technology arguably contributed to a fulfillment of these broader aspirations for Australian democracy. (p. 64)

Political parties in Australia increasingly use the Internet to connect with their members, other groups, individuals and other parties. But while political parties appear to be using the Internet to some advantage to build “quite varied and large Web networks around themselves”, recent research suggests that they “do more to reach the outside world than it does to reach them” (Ackland & Gibson, 2004, p. 29-30).

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