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Chapter XXI

Digital Government and Citizen Participation in International Context

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ABSTRACT

This book provides abundant evidence that the shift towards digital government is part of a sweeping set of changes. These are best viewed holistically, as they relate to pervasive shifts in the locus and purpose of many forms of control. These changes are visible in the gradual shift of terminology from 'government' to 'governance'. This chapter outlines the implications of this shift at the international level, and the role of digital technologies in global citizenship. Participation in these new regimes of global governance includes individuals as well as corporations, international institutions and non-government agencies.

The changes taking place are closely related to other aspects of globalisation, and the emerging patterns of communication and control all have correlates in the information systems that serve them. It is argued here that these patterns both influence and repeat at all scales. In the language of complex systems, these are fractal patterns. This and other concepts from complexity theory will be used to illustrate the growing interdependence of decision making at all levels, and the potential for these processes of governance to transform existing approaches to democracy. Digital participation is an essential element in these changes, and indicates vividly that all levels of governance are now interacting. This chapter conceptualises spheres of authority (Rosenau, 1997) as political attractors that can be simulated, where the rules of

interaction are driven by the values of the actors (Theys, 1998). This perspective can help to understand new forms of individual and institutional participation in a systemic context.

These new forms of governance, like the Internet itself, may require a set of generic protocols that operate across borders and scale from the local to the global. Overt democratic indicators may help address the global democratic deficit. Examples such as the Global Reporting Initiative may be seen as the early stages of such protocols. It is likely that in the future, mathematical modelling of governance patterns will become as widespread (and contested) as climate modelling is now. The implications of such an approach are discussed in the context of global digital participation. The governance of the Internet itself, through the mechanisms of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), provides a case study of current processes and their degree of democratic accountability. These patterns are compared with the corresponding agency in Australia, the Australian Domain Administration (AuDA). Both highlight the need for structured protocols for citizen engagement if the information infrastructure is to serve democratic ends.

INTRODUCTION

'Democracy doesn't scale.' Vint Cerf, one of the founders of the Internet, in an answer to a question posed by Scott Aikens from the Minnesota E-democracy project, at the Internet Society Conference in 1996.

Issues of global governance have grown in importance over recent decades (Meyer and Stefanova, 2001). The traditional basis for international relations, the Westphalian system, acknowledged the rule of law through cooperation between sovereign states. This system is no longer adequate for managing situations where borders and issues are more permeable and less defined, both conceptually and physically.

Globalisation is both a cause and a result of issues overflowing borders. Trade, human rights and refugees, environment and climate change, financial markets, terrorism, crime and disease control are among the issues requiring international consensus and management. There is an increasingly urgent need for clearly defined governance processes that are not just adequately resourced and enforceable, but that also integrate solutions in ways that support sustainable and equitable development. Existing multi-lateral agencies, such as the World Trade Organisation, International Monetary Fund, and many others, are being encouraged to adopt more inclusive, democratic and sustainable policies and processes. Likewise, calls for better corporate governance focus on greater transparency and social accountability. The strongest evidence for a democratic deficit is growing inequalities and political instability, since this is not a policy direction likely to be sanctioned by the majority. This dynamic seems to repeat at throughout many levels and current regimes of government, one of the traits of a fractal pattern.

Deepening inequality has been recognised as a threat to global security (Thomas, 2001; Theys, 1998), even before the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 2001. Privatised, self-regulatory patterns of governance, most often associated with the neo-liberal reforms that have become widespread in liberal democracies at least since the

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