Local Democracy Online: An Analysis of Local Government Web Sites in England and Wales*

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ABSTRACT

This report from the field analyzes the extent to which local authorities in England and Wales have responded to the e-democracy agenda by examining their Web sites and assessing their potential to deliver democracy. The analysis of Web sites provides a powerful insight into how local government is using the Internet to promote democracy. Two aspects of Web site use are particularly significant. First, the analysis reveals the overall commitment to e-democracy in local government, as it is a measure of actual behavior rather than simply an attitudinal survey. Second, it highlights the types of democratic structure being supported and the values being emphasized in the implementation of e-democracy. The research demonstrated that the potential of the Internet for enhancing democracy is not fully exploited by local authorities and there remain considerable variations between different authorities.

Keywords: e-democracy; England; local e-democracy; local government Web sites; online consultation; online democracy; online discussion; Wales

INTRODUCTION

The idea that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have the capacity to greatly enhance democracy is hardly new. As long ago as 1970, researchers were examining the possibilities and problems of technology-mediated democracy and arguing that democratic engagement could be enhanced through ICTs (Martin & Norman, 1970). It was only in the 1990s, however, with the commercial development of the Internet and its associated technologies, that the possibilities started to translate into reality. Initiatives from as far afield as Canada (Lyon, 1993) and the Netherlands (Schalken & Tops, 1995) experimented

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with different forms of citizen engagement in local government based primarily on the innovative application of new technologies. For the first time, new technologies were being taken seriously as a potential solution for some of democracy’s contemporary problems (cf. Arterton, 1987; Abrahamson, Arterton & Orren, 1988).  

Despite the existence of a range of e-democracy tools and some significant experience of using them in different contexts, the penetration and take-up of e-democracy in England and Wales, as elsewhere, remain limited. It is this gap between the existence of a variety of tools and their take-up that is the main focus of the research reported here. This paper reports on the results of a survey of local government Web sites in England and Wales. The results of a second phase of the project — in-depth interviews with a range of people who have responsibility for or an impact on local government’s approach to e-democracy — is described in more detail elsewhere (see Pratchett, Wingfield, & Karakaya-Polat, 2005).

Local government in the United Kingdom has made a significant investment in e-government over the last few years. Supported by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister through a range of ‘national projects’ and other devices, e-enabled local government is now considered to be a reality across all local authorities in England and Wales. Among these national projects has been a £4.5 million, 2-year local e-democracy program aimed at “harnessing the power of new technology to encourage citizen participation in local decision-making between election times” (cited in MORI, 2005, p. 9). This research analyzes the extent to which local authorities have responded to the e-democracy agenda by examining their Web sites and assessing their potential to deliver democracy. Consequently, it provides an analysis of e-democracy practice in England and Wales.

E-Democracy Online: A Framework for Analysis

The Web site is a core strategic tool for local authorities. It is a unique medium for communicating information and providing services. In the context of e-democracy, it is also a medium that can be used for encouraging political participation and democratic engagement. The Web site, hence, has a key role in providing channels for political participation and bringing life to the rhetoric of democratic renewal. In this research, the Web site analysis aimed to produce an e-democracy baseline and a first indication of the gap between rhetoric and reality in the e-democracy practices of local government.

Although the analysis of media sources and political documents has a long tradition (Berelson, 1952; Holsti, 1969), analysis of Web sites is a recent area of study within various disciplines. The research interests and specific research questions have differed across disciplines and depending on the purposes of the study. However, many of them start from the properties of the Internet and ask whether or not the examined Web sites exploit these properties. For example, Gibson and Ward (2000), in their analysis of political party Web sites, first identify the properties of the Internet and then ask, “given these distinctive properties, what are the particular ways in which we would expect parties to be using the WWW (emphasis added, p. 304)?” This leads to a technology-led evaluation of Web sites. We think that taking the properties of the Internet as “given” is a form of technological determinism. Instead, in this research we asked the following: “Given the importance of participation and democracy...