Chapter V

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

Lawrence Pratchett, De Montfort University, UK

Melvin Wingfield, De Montfort University, UK

Rabia Karakaya Polat, Isik University, Istanbul

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.
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 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).1

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,
Drop the "e": Marketing E-Government to Skeptical and Web-Weary Decision Makers
www.igi-global.com/chapter/drop-marketing-government-skeptical-web/9765?camid=4v1a