Chapter 2
Innovations in Information and Communication Technology Platforms for Public Administration: Consulting the British Public in the Digital Age

Shefali Virkar
University of Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, public confidence and trust in government has declined visibly in several Western liberal democracies, owing to a distinct lack of opportunities for citizen participation in political processes, and has given way instead to disillusionment with current political institutions, actors, and practices. The rise of the Internet as a global communications medium has opened up huge opportunities and raised new challenges for government, with digital technology creating new forms of community, empowering citizens, and reforming existing power structures in a way that has rendered obsolete or inappropriate many of the tools and processes of traditional democratic politics. Through an analysis of the No. 10 Downing Street ePetitions Initiative based in the United Kingdom, this chapter seeks to engage with issues related to the innovative use of network technology by government to involve citizens in policy processes within existing democratic frameworks in order to improve administration, reform democratic processes, and renew citizen trust in institutions of governance.

INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, there has been increased questioning of traditional democratic politics in Western liberal democracies, largely due to a decline in and a lack of opportunity for public participation in these processes. Such concerns are largely thought to be embodied in (amongst other phenomena) low voter turnout during elections; a trend particularly noticeable...
amongst young people where only half of those eligible to vote actually do so (The Electoral Commission Report, 2005). This is especially worrying and problematic for governments, as it speaks of growing political apathy and a broader, more general disillusionment with current political institutions, actors and practices. Whilst it is impossible to comprehensively untangle all the reasons for the decline in civic participation in these countries, there is little doubt that many citizens feel distanced from any sense of political relevance or power, often under the impression that not only will their votes and individual voices be drowned out in the clamour of the crowd, but that the rules which govern their daily lives are drawn up by politicians and bureaucrats whom they will never meet and who are usually extremely difficult to contact (Eggers, 2005).

Leading commentators have described the political processes and institutions integral to Western democracies as undergoing what has been variously described as ‘a crisis of legitimacy’, a ‘credibility crisis’ or a ‘crisis of democracy’ (cf. Habermas, 1985, Archibugi & Held, 1995), and are fast reaching agreement that the fundamental flaw lies in traditional decision-making practices which are, in their current form, often democratically inadequate as they fail to provide extensive and relatively equal opportunities for citizens, communities and groups to contribute towards the shaping of decision-making agendas (Sclove 1995). The focus of discourse and scholarly activity, both in academic and policy circles, has thus gradually shifted away from a more centralised, top-down conception of ‘government’ – those formal institutions and processes which operate at the level of the nation state to maintain public order and facilitate collective action (Stoker, 1998) – towards the notions of ‘governance’, an idea which, while traditionally a synonym for government, has been captured in recent theoretical work as signifying ‘a change in the meaning of government referring to a new process of governing; or a changed condition of ordered rule; or the new method by which society is governed’ (Rhodes, 1996: 652).

Governance is thus seen to be ultimately concerned with crafting the conditions for ordered rule and collective action, or ‘the creation of a structure or an order which cannot be externally imposed, but which is the result of the interaction of a multiplicity of governing and each other influencing actors’ (Kooiman & Van Vliet, 1993: 64), and is thus a conceptual way of capturing shifts in the character of political rule which has been stretched to encompass a range of different transformations including an emphasis on drawing citizens and communities into the process of collaborative participation in political processes and the creation of new forms of governable subjects (Newman, 2005).

**DIS(CONNECTED) CITIZENSHIP? AN EXPLORATION OF KEY CONCEPTS**

The idea of governance, and by extension e-Governance, may therefore be said to comprise of two distinct but complementary elements: that of e-Government – which encompasses all the formal institutional and legal structures of a country, and e-Democracy – which can be said to refer to the participative and deliberative processes which operate within those structures (Virkar, 2007). Broadly speaking, on the one hand, e-Government itself may be divided into two distinct areas: (1) e-Administration, which refers to the improvement of government processes and to the streamlining of the internal workings of the public sector often using ICT-based information systems, and (2) e-Services, which refers to the improved delivery of public services to citizens through multiple electronic platforms (Virkar, 2011). On the other, the concept of e-Democracy may be further subdivided into two distinct areas: e-Participation, which emphasises opportunities for greater consultation and dialogue between government and citizens, and e-Voting, the expres-
Related Content

Adaptive Computation Paradigm in Knowledge Representation: Traditional and Emerging Applications
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/adaptive-computation-paradigm-knowledge-representation/29560?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/adaptive-computation-paradigm-knowledge-representation/29560?camid=4v1a)

A Roadmap on Awareness of Others in Accessible Collaborative Rich Internet Applications
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/a-roadmap-on-awareness-of-others-in-accessible-collaborative-rich-internet-applications/188220?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/a-roadmap-on-awareness-of-others-in-accessible-collaborative-rich-internet-applications/188220?camid=4v1a)

Exploration and Exploitation of Developers’ Sentimental Variations in Software Engineering
[www.igi-global.com/article/exploration-and-exploitation-of-developers-sentimental-variations-in-software-engineering/166542?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/exploration-and-exploitation-of-developers-sentimental-variations-in-software-engineering/166542?camid=4v1a)

Aligning Supply Chain Logistics Costs via ERP Coordination
[www.igi-global.com/article/aligning-supply-chain-logistics-costs-via-erp-coordination/216459?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/aligning-supply-chain-logistics-costs-via-erp-coordination/216459?camid=4v1a)