E-Governance in Australian Local Government: Spinning a Web Around Community?

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ABSTRACT

Local government in Australia is under pressure to modernize its structures in the new public management environment, as well as respond to increasing demands from its local electorates for better delivery of services and greater levels of participation in the democratic process. This article analyzes local government’s response to these pressures through its use of information communication technologies (ICT) to execute its broad range of tasks. I begin by discussing e-governance in the light of Chadwick and May’s (2003) three basic models of interaction between the state and its citizens: managerial, consultative, and participatory. Using data collected from an analysis of 658 local government Web sites in Australia together with existing survey research, I analyze the extent to which local government sites fit into the three models. The article then concludes with a discussion of the issues and problems faced by local government in its attempt to develop e-governance, as both an extension of its administrative as well as democratic functions.

Keywords: citizen access; e-democracy; e-government; local government; online government

INTRODUCTION

Australia’s local governments, like many other institutions of governance around the world, are facing a raft of new challenges in the 21st century. The governance environment, within which local governments function, has undergone substantial change over recent years. The pressure for reform has seen major structural changes as state and federal governments seek to impose a new economic and political agenda upon the local institutions of governance (Baker, 2003). The focus of
local government reform has revolved mainly around issues of statutory service obligations, financial accountability, local economic development and, to a lesser degree, democratic representation (Dollery, Marshall & Worthington, 2003). To some extent this has meant a more inward-looking local government framework, where compliance with competition policy guidelines and more efficient service delivery has dominated the agenda (Aulich, 1997).

More recently local governments have adopted Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in the form of Web sites in the hope of expanding their role in the new world of e-government. With large cash injections from the federal government’s “Networking the Nation” program and local state programs to improve the reach of ICT, local governments have set about the task of relocating much of their activity online (Macdonald, 2001). The first wave of Web sites has been established on the Internet and local governments are now in the process of learning how to work in the world of e-government.

As this article demonstrates, the first rush of e-government, and for that matter e-governance, has brought mixed results for local government across Australia. Web sites exist for most local governments, but the types of e-governance vary from place to place both within and between the state systems. The first section of this article discusses an analytical framework for understanding e-government. The second section outlines the background of local government across Australia. This is followed by a discussion of local government approaches to e-governance using data from a review of local government sites. The final section discusses the major issues that face any future development of e-governance for local government in Australia.

E-GOVERNMENT

In the Australian Local Government Association’s report entitled A Directional Roadmap for the Use of Electronic Technology by Councils, e-government is defined as “the structured use of electronic technology to pursue the traditional goals of government in areas such as:

- the interface with government
- service relationships with people and businesses
- commercial relationships with business partners
- implementing sectoral and community based policy
- enhancing the role of citizens in democratic processes (i.e., e-democracy)
- interacting with other public institutions, and

Such a list is instructive in the way it reaffirms the fundamental role of “government” in interfacing, implementing, conducting, and servicing. For