Chapter XII

E-Participation in Local Government Decision Making: Swedish and Australian Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

Modern society will only reach its potential when citizens individually and collectively are able to use their knowledge and capabilities to shape their lives and communities. Citizen participation in government decision making that uses online technologies is one way of leveraging this capacity, and has been termed e-participation. Case studies of a Swedish and an Australian local government examine how e-participation fits into initiatives to increase community involvement in decision making. Interactive chat sessions between stakeholders can facilitate debate. Information portals can provide supporting information in interesting and accessible ways. E-voting can enable greater input and influence by a wider number of citizens. But ultimately the technology choice and e-participation implementation must be driven by the objectives of the engagement exercise, and these can range from better decisions to community capacity building and issues of trust and legitimacy.

INTRODUCTION

Modern society will only reach its potential when citizens individually and collectively are able to use their knowledge and capacity to shape their lives and communities, and consequently citizen participation in decision making by governments has become a dominant theme in public sector management and governance (Box 1998; Thomas 1995), along with the question of how internet channels of communication might facilitate these initiatives (Coleman & Gotze, 2001; Macintosh, 2007a, 2007b; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Citizen participation in government decision
making through online and other electronic technologies has been termed e-participation (Macintosh, 2007a).

The objective of this chapter is to outline the nature and effect of e-participation activities that occur as part of local government initiatives to involve citizens in council decision making. The research presents a contextual analysis of e-participation within an Australian and a Swedish local government reform initiative. Firstly the background to citizen participation in government decision making and the role of the internet in such initiatives is examined. Secondly, case studies are presented for community engagement initiatives in a Swedish and an Australian local government that have gained reputations for robust and innovative e-participation practice in their community engagement initiatives. Finally, future trends and areas for further research are examined and conclusions from the cases are drawn in order to inform practice at other councils.

**BACKGROUND**

E-participation is an increasingly vital part of world-wide initiatives by governments to achieve a genuine, vibrant and effective democracy through greater public involvement in the work of governments and improved accountabilities (see for example Audit Commission, 2003; Department of Justice Canada, 2001; Solli, Demediuk, & Sims, 2005). The concept of e-participation intersects with the e-government, e-democracy, e-voting and e-governance debates (Demediuk, 2007; Macintosh, 2007a, 2007b). E-government refers to government’s use of information technology to exchange information and services with citizens, businesses, and other stakeholders. E-democracy is about using technologies to reinforce the connection between public officials and communities thereby leading to a stronger, more accountable and inclusive democracy. E-voting encompasses electronically enabled voting technologies that are designed to increase participation as well as providing a quicker and more cost effective means of organising public consultations. E-governance involves the use of information technology to improve relations and interaction between the public authorities and civil society to raise the quality of the services that governments deliver to citizens and businesses (Council of Europe, 2008). Consequently the issues in this chapter concerning e-participation are relevant to these other debates.

Where citizens become more involved as actors in the work of government outside the election cycle, a new form of governance ensues. This ‘local governance’ enables rational decision making by governments that is attuned to, and influenced by the community. This new localism is especially appealing at the local government level due to the closeness of the public and the services that councils provide – and so it is more practical to know communities better, make performance more visible, and ultimately give local people more power. The central argument is that increased citizen participation allows for better-informed government decision making that leads to improved policy and service delivery for the community. As well stimulating better decision processes and outcomes, citizen participation also has the potential to improve: the honouring of democratic ideals; social cohesion; community capacity; trust in government; legitimisation of authority; political stability; and skills and knowledge of the public and institutions (see for example Roberts, 2004; Thomas, 1995; Wang & Wart, 2007).

But while governments must find new ways of listening to the voice of people (Bingham, Nabachi, & O’Leary, 2005), there is a gap in the knowledge about what works, what does not work and why, so closer study of practice is required to inform future policy and action (Box, 1998; Fung, 2006; Thomas, 1995; Wang, 2001; Yang, 2005). In particular there needs to be a good understanding of the role the Internet can play in providing...
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