E-Government to E-Democracy

Communicative Mechanisms of Governance

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E-Government to E-Democracy:
Communicative Mechanisms of Governance

Lori Anderson
Patrick Bishop

ABSTRACT. Significant claims have been made that developments in e-government can lead to e-democracy. However, the ‘league tables’ that are regularly published rating different governments’ performance and the laudatory tones in which governments identify their own actions as more democratic in the field of e-government need to be treated with some caution. Assessments of democratisation can be marred by the enthusiasm of technological determinists or governments themselves. This paper reviews aspects of this literature, empirical data gathering and e-
democracy trials and advances a possible framework for assessing the
democratic merits of technological innovations. [Article copies available
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KEYWORDS. E-democracy, dialogue, governance, government, com-
munication, evaluation

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates current e-government practices and some
claims that have been made about better democracy as a result of their
adoption. We find that a fluid and imprecise notion of what constitutes
e-democracy is being used in current trials and evaluations. We also
consider the problem of technological determinism as it relates to an im-
plied reshaping of representative democratic governance. We then ad-
vance an idea about what more democratic representative democracy
would have to achieve as a challenge to the technologists—how might
the new technology achieve more democratic outcomes? In doing so,
we propose a way in which e-innovations can be evaluated in terms of
their politics rather than on technological competence alone.

E-GOVERNMENT:
CELEBRATING AND COMPETING

Failures to foresee the reach of new technology are often matched by
overly optimistic expectations of how technology might improve poli-
tics. While, after the event, the prediction that “640K ought to be
enough for anybody” looks almost as flawed as the assertion that “there
is a world market for maybe five computers”; (Applbaum 2002, 18) the
optimistic response to the invention of the Telegraph—that a world par-
lament was now inevitable—has also proved well off the mark.1 Al-
though e-government initially lagged behind commercial applications
of the new technology (Gualtieri 1998), a similar air of enthusiasm now
pervades discussions of e-government, leading to an apparent ‘tech
race’ between national administrations. This is captured in excerpts
from a Brown University press release entitled ‘Second Annual Global
E-Government Study Shows Taiwan, South Korea, and Canada Overtaking United States.

The second annual survey conducted by Professor Darrell M. West of the Taubman Center for Public Policy at Brown University, measured each country’s on-line presence on a 100-point scale using more than two dozen different criteria, including the availability of contact information, publications, databases, portals, privacy, security, disability access, and the number of online services. A previous study of global e-government was released last year. [2001]

This year’s study reviewed 1,197 national government websites in 198 countries during June and July, 2002. Among the sites analyzed were those of executive offices, legislative offices, judicial offices, Cabinet offices, and major agencies serving crucial functions of government, such as health, human services, taxation, education, interior, economic development, administration, natural resources, foreign affairs, foreign investment, transportation, military, tourism, and business regulation.

Last year’s global leader in digital government, the United States, dropped to fourth place (60.1), behind Taiwan (72.5), South Korea (64) and Canada (61.1). Chile moved up to fifth place with 60 points, followed by Australia with 58.3 points. (Brown University 2002)

The West study then lists a table of each of the world’s 198 countries ranked on e-government performance in 2002. From this study, the findings of the research also include:

- 12 percent of government websites offered services that are fully executable online, up from 8 percent in 2001.
- The most frequent services are ordering publications, making travel reservations, searching and applying for jobs, applying for passports, and renewing vehicle licenses.
- 77 percent of websites provide access to publications and 83 percent have links to databases (the latter being up from 41 percent in 2001).
- 14 percent of government websites feature a one-stop services portal or have links to a government portal.
14 percent (up from 6 percent in 2001) show privacy policies, while 9 percent (up from 3 percent in 2001) have security policies. (West, 2002)

This study, first conducted in 2001, had its third iteration in 2003 with some quite dramatic advances and reversals in rankings. In the 2002 survey, for example, we were surprised to find, following our own examination and interviews with the architects of the extensive Help.gv site of the Austrian Government, that they ranked forty-second. Their self-perception was that they were close to “European Best Practice.”2 In the 2003 survey they are now ranked number ten. The most surprising slide from 2002 to 2003 has been South Korea. At a government-sponsored conference in South Korea in November 20023 their ranking of number two was mentioned regularly amid considerable self-congratulation. Their ranking at thirty in the 2003 survey must have led to considerable consternation in the same South Korean agencies that had been so pleased at the 2002 result. While any measurement of the impact of new technologies on a diverse social and political landscape will not be easy, the report does not go into details as to how or why this dramatic slide has occurred.4 By publishing and publicizing his results as a ‘league table,’ however, West implies winners and losers in e-government performance and that better performance in this area is desirable, but what is being evaluated, if not celebrated by this survey?

In some cases successful e-government is occurring in countries that do not have good track records in democracy. Some of the most successful countries are not even democratic states. The current number one, Singapore, is an authoritarian regime. Taiwan and South Korea are of the second rank in terms of political rights and civil liberties according to ‘rights watch’ organisation Freedom House’s scale5 (see Figure 1). China, ranked seven in 2002 and eleven in 2003, has the worst possible ranking for political rights, and is not alone amongst high-ranking e-government performers in lacking a free press. Malaysia, Singapore and Turkey (ranked ‘partly free’) also miss out in this crucial indicator. In fact, no country in the top ten for e-government performance features in the top rank for press freedom in the Freedom House survey.

Aware of the variety of different political regimes his study encompasses, West simply rules it out as a variable. “In each system analysed, we employ the same type of criteria in order to be able to compare the results across countries” (West 2003, 3). It is unfair, therefore, to expect such a data gathering exercise to deliver results relating to democracy when it is specifically devised to measure only ‘technical’ performance.
The following exhortation from the Brown University 2002 press release, makes a more qualitative claim—that better e-government is in some way of benefit to the, now commonly conflated citizen/customer.

Goverments should promote features that allow citizens to post comments or otherwise provide feedback about a government agency. They also should consider market research, public opinion

FIGURE 1. E-Government Rank Compared to Freedom House Rank of Political Rights, Civil Liberties and Press Freedom

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<td>Range /100</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>Free 21-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>Free 21-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>Free 11-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>Free 11-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>Free 21-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>Free 11-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Non democracy</td>
<td>Not Free 71-80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>Free 21-30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2003)

| 1                      | Singapore    | Non democracy    | Not Free 61-70 | 5              | 4              |
| 2                      | United States| Democracy        | Free 11-20 | 1              | 1              |
| 3                      | Canada       | Democracy        | Free 11-20 | 1              | 1              |
| 4                      | Australia    | Democracy        | Free 11-20 | 1              | 1              |
| 5                      | Taiwan       | Democracy        | Free 21-30 | 2              | 2              |
| 6                      | Turkey       | Democracy        | Partly Free 51-60 | 3              | 4              |
| 7                      | Great Britain| Democracy        | Free 11-20 | 1              | 1              |
| 8                      | Malaysia     | Non democracy    | Not Free 71-80 | 5              | 5              |
| 9                      | Vatican      | Non democracy    | No data       | -              | -              |
| 10                     | Austria      | Democracy        | Free 21-30 | 1              | 1              |
| 11                     | China        | Non democracy    | Not Free 71-80 | 7              | 6              |
| 30                     | South Korea  | Democracy        | Free 21-30 | 2              | 2              |
surveys, or focus groups that would provide them with information on how citizens feel about e-government websites and what features would attract them to use these sites.

In the 2003 study West is even clearer as to the benefits of e-government:

E-government offers the potential to bring citizens closer to their government. Regardless of the type of political system that a country has, the public benefits from interactive features that facilitate communication between citizens and government. (West 2003 p.7 emphasis added)

In a survey that only evaluates sites—a ‘cyber’ reality, where the type and qualities of the broader political regime are purposefully excluded—normative assertions of desirable systems of government cannot be supported by the data. For example, whether it is prudent for citizens to respond to a government request to ‘post comments’ surely depends on whether the regime is democratic or authoritarian.

What is clear from this comparison between the West studies and the Freedom House regime indicators is that it is possible to have extensive e-government without democracy, even in its most minimal form. Moreover, a government can be placed quite highly on the e-government scale and still be at, or near, the bottom when it comes to measures of political rights, civil liberties and press freedom. Any case for a transition from e-government to e-democracy, therefore, needs to measure democracy rather than just the success (or failure) of efforts to adopt electronic technology.

The new technology, as identified in this study, is politically agnostic, as at home in an authoritarian regime as in a democracy. E-government can be anti-democratic. Certainly, there are potential Orwellian implications of a two-way, interactive medium. For example, what ‘cookies’ might an unscrupulous government add to people’s computers who use a consultation site? The American Civil Liberties Union, responding to the provisions of Section 216 of the USA Patriot Act argues that it extends an already low standard of proof—far less than ‘probable cause’—to allow law enforcement officers to determine what websites a person had visited, leading to their assertion, that received wide publicity, that law enforcement officers could “require the librarian to report on the books you had perused while visiting the public library” (American Civil Liberties Union 2001).
In a regional statistical survey of e-government in South America, David Altman suggests that countries with “high levels of satisfaction with democracy are where e-government is less likely to develop” and raises the question whether e-government actually has positive effects on satisfaction with democracy and democratic accountability (Altman 2002, 16). The relatively high scores of China, and recently, Singapore and Malaysia—in the absence of democratic government—may be one way for regimes to ‘build’ trust using the new technology to bypass democratisation.

Jane Fountain, in developing her case that the new technology reshapes bureaucracy, claims significant cost-savings through the use of information technology in general (2002, 127), while West’s most recent work (2004, 25) still sees the cost of specific e-government infrastructure as a ‘pressing challenge.’ Even if an efficiency dividend could be established it is not, of itself, a democratic value. The most dramatic way we can see delivery of government services via electronic technology assisting in building trust in government in a manner that may also deliver a democratic dividend, is through its potential to remove petty corruption at the local level—the ‘kickback’ or ‘bribe.’ That is: an electronic transaction is rendered consistently transparent by removing the role of the potentially corrupt actor. This procedural fairness argument is a strong one. A commitment to equal treatment, however, might deny one of the most effective commercial mechanisms for building Internet usage of service delivery—the online discount. Airlines, hotel chains, car rental firms have all built Internet usage of their services through providing their best rates on the internet. These commercial incentives may, however, cut across government commitments to provide the same level of service and the same fee to all citizens, a sense of equality we argue is characteristic of democracy.

**AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE**

We now consider two experiments conducted to advance the concept of e-democracy in the context of representative government. The case studies are from two Australian state governments and have been recently evaluated by Steven Clift, in a report commissioned by the Commonwealth Centre for Electronic Governance. Generally laudatory, Clift concludes that he is “extremely bullish on the future of e-democracy in government in Australia and New Zealand.” Initiatives he endorses as ‘important’ and ‘exciting,’ however, need more critical in-
vestigation, beyond these adjectives, to ground these assessments in democratic theory and to assess their impacts on existing institutions of representative democracy.

Of the Queensland state government’s initiative, Clift says it “is the clearest sign of political support for e-democracy issued by a government in the region, perhaps anywhere in the world to date” (Clift 2002). The Queensland government has certainly been active in promoting its e-democracy profile. In November 2001 it restructured the Department of the Premier and Cabinet to include the Community Engagement Division. In announcing the initiative, Premier Peter Beattie asserted: “the role of Government is changing. The community is seeking better Government leadership through increased public participation in decision-making. I am willing to accept this challenge.” The reform was aimed at “strengthening relations with citizens,” which the Premier saw as “a sound investment in better policy-making by allowing government to tap new sources of relevant ideas, information and resources when making decisions.” (Beattie, cited in Clift 2002).

In a move that Clift identifies as “the highest level of formal e-democracy policy interest that I have seen in any government” (Clift 2002) the Community Engagement Division’s ‘Direction Statement,’ contains a commitment by the Premier to a Queensland E-Democracy Three Year Trial, approved by Cabinet and assigned to the Community Engagement Division to develop. While he also notes, “current developments in the UK will certainly place it in the lead on a national scale,” he sees Queensland as “the place to watch in terms of measurable and identifiable outcomes due to its relatively modest population of around 3 million people” (Clift 2002).

As proclaimed on the government’s own website, the commitments include “exploring the many new opportunities the Internet brings and to discovering ways in which this medium can strengthen participative democracy within Queensland–The Smart State.”7 (Queensland Government 2003). Despite mention of ‘participative democracy’ the definition places the trial squarely in the bounds of existing representative political structures. ‘E-democracy’ here is seen as being “at the convergence of traditional democratic processes and Internet technology” (Queensland Government 2003). From the government’s perspective, “it refers to how the Internet can be used to enhance our democratic processes and provide increased opportunities for individuals and communities to interact with government” (Queensland Government 2003).

This institutional placement is significant and is reiterated when the definition is expanded to comprise “a range of Internet based activities
that aim to strengthen democratic processes and institutions, including government agencies.” Specifically this amounts to “providing accessible information resources online; conducting policy consultation online; and facilitating electronic input to policy development.” Further, the initiative is government led, where it retains the responsibility “to expand the channels of communication to reach as many citizens as possible.” The preamble concludes:

The Internet is not inherently democratic, but it can be used for democratic purposes. The full implications of how the Internet will enhance this interaction are yet to be explored. (Queensland Government 2003)

The trial includes a three year commitment to: “post a number of issues on the website on which the Government desires wide consultation and feedback; provide online access to Government consultation documents relevant to those issues, such as discussion and policy papers and draft bills; broadcast Parliamentary debates over the Internet; and develop a system to accept petitions to the Queensland Parliament online” (Queensland Government 2003).

The trial is underway. The first e-petitions have been submitted and parliamentary debates are now available by audio streaming. The first practice, while utilizing the new technology, directly mirrors the ‘analogue’ environment. That is, it has only generated a new method for submitting petitions, it has not altered their status—they still only have the capacity to influence decision-makers if they choose to take notice. They do not, as is the case in California, have any direct constitutional power to become ballot propositions, or to recall elected officials. While Queensland State parliament debates are, for the first time, available to a wider audience than those who actually attend, the technology is only being used as a narrowcast system. The technically possible opportunity to send in comments direct to parliamentarians via the Internet, in real time, has not been adopted.

The posting of e-democracy initiatives for comment presents the most problems for administrators, given the avowed place of these initiatives within representative democratic decision-making structures. The questions posted so far have been relatively uncontroversial and it is not yet clear what the response rate has been. The problems occur in the amount of management that a government operated site requires. A policy officer from Disability Queensland, who accepted funds allocated to agencies participating in the initiative and was wrestling with
what questions to post, advised that the government had adopted a sys-
tem of ‘double-posting.’ Items would only get on the public website
once they were subject to approval by public servants. While this is pru-
dent for a government-sponsored site, it also generates problems. Groups in the community who are suspicious of any involvement with
government simply won’t participate if they know they will be subject
to censorship. On the other hand, racist comments or views can be
posted in subtle ways that are not always detected. In a similar process
with Regional Community Forums, for example, submissions appar-
ently from advocates of Esperanto, a universal language (itself not rac-
ist), were accepted without realising that their rationale was to deny the
teaching of any other languages apart from English or Esperanto, a
xenophobic, if not an outright racist proposal, in a multicultural society (Queensland Government 2000).

This trial also takes place in a very crowded cyber space. While such
government postings are still rare, there are many existing media sites,
(eg: msn.com) where ‘votes’ are sought in a sensationalist manner that
aims for controversy, rather than avoids it. Participants are invited to
“Have your say!” Here, questions are posed to generate controversy—
“Are the laws against child sex offenders tough enough?” “Should the
latest teenage murderer be executed?”—and only yes/no answers are
possible. Such sites, now part of mainstream media, may have already
generated expectations that compete with any new government initia-
tives. If government postings are benign, bland or ‘feel good,’ it may
well add to, rather than address, community cynicism.

Clift also reports on another Government initiative in the state of
New South Wales–communitybuilders.nsw. He calls this initiative
“one of the more exciting government-sponsored interactive examples I
have discovered anywhere” (Clift 2000). Attempting to be at one re-
move from government, it is termed an online “community of practice.”
Clift places it in the following context. “If online consultation related to
policy development, government-hosted communities of practice relate
to the implementation of policy” (Clift 2000). The Premier states that
the initiative is designed to

help local communities across the State share ideas on how to en-
hance and strengthen their community . . . This site aims to com-
municate how different communities have addressed various
issues such as enhancing public safety, stimulating employment
and promoting reconciliation. (Carr, cited in Clift 2000)
He then inserts a claim about where this fits with his government’s agenda. “It shows how my government is forging partnerships with communities around the state” and concludes with an invitation to the people: “It is very much your site. Although the Premier’s Department will be responsible for updating the site and keeping information fresh, the site’s success will depend on people such as yourself sharing the information you think is relevant” (Carr, cited in Clift 2000).

Clift’s warm, even effusive, endorsement of the project concludes:

With over 1100 participants, their hybrid web forum–e-mail notification system with a supporting website–positions government as a facilitator of public work rather than just as a provider of services. Providing a many-to-many online space related to a public mandate will allow government departments to adapt their implementation strategies and incrementally improve their policy approaches as well. The Internet improves through trial and error. Communities of practice hosted by government may be a starting point for incremental government reform rather than the huge mega-project model that often falls on its face. (Clift 2000)

This site, while offering a communicative space for community interaction, operates within clear parameters. While the Premier asserts the initiative builds community-government partnerships, the interaction is, in fact, community to community and there is a clear attempt to create a perception of being nongovernmental—the architecture of the site looks community-based without the usual trappings of a governmental corporate style, characteristic of the Queensland site. Nonetheless, it has problems attracting postings from some of the more wary activist groups.9 As an exercise in government community trust building, it still fails to include those who have lost trust. It also misses an opportunity to improve representative democratic practice in that it targets policy implementation rather than policy development. Its content is therefore more technical than political.

As yet, the primary concern of public sector managers who have the task of designing and maintaining these sites has been to meet the political objective of having an e-democracy ‘presence’10 They have done this without giving due consideration to the possibility that some forms of consultative practice may actually be harmful to governments and the policy process (see, for example, Irvin and Stansbury 2004; Kane and Bishop 2002). Despite the somewhat patronising tone of Clift’s conclusion,11 our interviewees—various government bureau-
crats in Queensland and New South Wales—have invariably drawn attention to their respective endorsements from the international expert of e-democracy. This endorsement has also led to some complacency on the part of our interviewees when it comes to exploring the possible ways in which these initiatives may either fail to deliver on raised expectations of more participatory democracy or, a more pressing concern, the potential for this failure to embarrass governments rather than meet their objective—to improve their standing in the eyes of the public.

**E-GOVERNMENT AND E-DEMOCRACY**

The Australian case studies discussed above blur the distinction between e-democracy and e-government. E-government is about the electronic delivery of government services, and as our earlier comparisons of the West and Freedom House rankings showed, is neutral as to what kind of government regime. E-democracy requires more qualitative assessments and is usually identified as some level of engagement, via the web or the Internet, with citizen’s views about what should and shouldn’t be government policy. This distinction has been blurred by the exhortation from West that a push for more citizen feedback somehow improves e-government performance. The ringing endorsements and the title of Stephen Clift’s report on Australia—*From E-governance to E-democracy*—implies a normative argument and yet he does not make clear how these new initiatives improve representative democracy. A recent policy brief from the OECD makes a more sober point. “E-government is more about government than about ‘e’” (OECD 2003, 1). It is even more the case that ‘e-democracy’ is about ‘democracy’. The challenge presented by the new technology is not merely about what is now possible but what in fact is desirable. It is, in other words, fundamentally a theoretical problem regarding the ideals of democracy itself. (see Bishop et al. 2002) If it is to make projections about the development of e-democracy, any study of e-government must assess the qualities of government that new techniques and technologies engender.

**EVALUATING E-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES AS AN ADVANCE OF DEMOCRACY**

West’s series of *Global E-government* surveys evaluate the relative success or failure of the application of new technology to the practice of
government (2001, 2002, 2003). The government-promoted e-democracy trials discussed in the Australian case studies have also been evaluated primarily in terms of their application of technology. As a management technique adopted by governments and administrators, the new technology can produce benefits that are internal to government such as increased managerial efficiency and effectiveness, and also deliver benefits external to government, by improving information flows and providing services to citizens and businesses. While the examples above emphasise and celebrate the external citizen relationship they also propose internal benefits. West, for example, suggests that benefits accrue to government in gaining diverse perspectives from citizens and also recommends regional alliances so that site development costs can be shared (West 2002, 14). Both Premiers in the Australian cases acknowledge that e-government trials also enhance and exemplify their broader political agendas.

The technological focus of much e-government evaluation means that actual, or potential, democratic impacts are not measured; in fact, they are overlooked. Benefits are touted and celebrated but not defined. Both the Clift and West reviews present or imply a staged model of the development of e-government. Benefits flow through a progression from less to more technological sophistication. As with other models of consultative practice (see Bishop and Davis 2002) stages progress from simple one-way information posting in information dissemination, to two-way information exchange, to interactive service transaction, to vertical and horizontal organizational integration and finally to political participation (Moon 2002, 426). While this is a logical and useful framework from a governmental perspective focusing on what is and can be available through technology, it implies rather than specifies any particular democratic components of the practice.

What we address here is the relationship between e-government and e-democracy. Primarily we are arguing that technology needs to be seen as an aid to communication rather than the determining factor in exploring the democratic potential in e-government practices.

**TECHNOLOGY AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL**

Technological determinism obscures the public communicative character of democracy. If we are to explore the democratic governance potential of technology, where technology is no longer viewed as an end itself, but as a communicative tool, we need to disentangle e-govern-
ment from e-democracy so we can see in what way the new technology might be used to form better democracy. When treated as a tool, technology’s role is to facilitate public discourse and become a communicative mechanism of governance, subservient to governance goals. This lens shifts the focus from the technological to the democratic.

With this shift in focus, technology now becomes a series of communication tools, which supports a range of communication from the simplest to most sophisticated. The simplest communication is information dissemination or one-way communication. One party provides information to another party without feedback or response, for example, information posted on a government website where there is no opportunity for the viewer to respond to the posted information.

Information exchange is two-way communication in which both parties exchange information without confirming that the communication has been understood, for example a web-based survey posted on a government website. Information has been exchanged between the government and the viewer and neither has confirmed their communication has been understood. In this schema of communication tools, new technology is a method for enhancing e-government by providing one-way and two-way communication but does not offer any qualitative advances over older technologies, such as letter writing, petitions and media broadcasts.

Political contest utilizes discussion as defined by the late British physicist, David Bohm (1917-1992) who articulated a distinction between discussion and dialogue that assists our exploration of the different communicative qualities implied by e-democracy (as distinct from e-government). In discussion, participants present and defend their views and individuals talk to persuade others. Their goal is to convince other participants of their view. Decision and action are outcomes of discussion. In Western societies, discussion is the most frequent, familiar and primary mode of verbal communication. It is the communication mode in which most individuals are comfortable, practiced and skilled. Even when congenial or friendly, discussion generates competition. (Bohm 2002) It is also the character of most political discourse and congruent with the adversarial political party exchanges familiar to observers of debates in Congress or Parliament-key institutions of representative democracy. It is also often the communicative mode of political interest groups and lobbyists. It is the form of communicative interaction most consistent with many practices of a pluralist, representative democracy.
Political conversation relies on dialogue. In contrast to discussion, participants in dialogue listen to understand. Each participant watches for and exposes his or her own and other participants’ assumptions or biases. The goal is to identify values. Understanding and creativity are the outcomes of dialogue. Whatever its tone, dialogue generates meaning and knowledge (Bohm 2002).

Both discussion and dialogue are appropriate modes for most interactive contexts (see Figure 2). In the public arena, dialogue and discussion are potentially complimentary. Dialogue explores complex and subtle issues not evident in most discussions and offers an opportunity for shared meaning, creativity and learning. Discussion allows positions to be articulated, decisions made and actions taken. Dialogue creates the conditions necessary for shared meaning to emerge. An example of this political conversation occurs in focus groups where government representatives non-defensively listen to understand the views of the consumers of governmental services.

Surprisingly, a number of practices that might be seen as direct democracy employ only information dissemination. In a referendum, it is the citizen who informs the government of his or her opinion. While direct democracy is often presented as the most desirable form of democracy, it utilizes the least sophisticated form of communication, information dissemination or one-way communication. There is no information exchange, contest or conversation in this kind of direct democracy. This simplest form of communication is also the mode found on media websites offering ‘yes/no’ voting on sensationalist propositions or via phone responses at the end of public affairs television programs.

Australia, where the referendum is the mechanism to alter the national constitution, provides a good recent example of how this form of direct democracy where decision-making authority resides with the citizens, is not conducted as a dialogue but as simple information dissemination, with very clear political consequences. While opinion polls

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<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Talk to Persuade</td>
<td>Convince Other Participants</td>
<td>Decision &amp; Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td>Listen to Understand</td>
<td>Identify Values</td>
<td>Understanding &amp; Creativity</td>
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showed general support from Australians wanting to become a republic, the referendum format with its presentation of a ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ case, and the way in which the political campaign was subsequently waged (Irving 2000), meant that the desired option was not achieved because the method of communication was at the level of information dissemination. Rather than generating dialogue, or even discussion, the move to the referendum simply reverses the role of decision maker from representative to citizen.

Most e-government practices, where they are undertaken in democracies, occur in representative democracies. All innovations do not necessarily enhance democratic character. The 2004 nomination race for the US Democrat Presidential candidate, for example, saw Primary candidate Howard Dean raise a considerable amount of money via the Internet but this in itself wasn’t e-democracy. While lists of contributors form a campaign database, it does not give them any input into subsequent policy development, if the candidate is elected. In a representative democracy, whoever is elected works in the interests of the public—all the public—not just those who supported the candidate. Even if purchased at a lower cost by more people, preferential treatment for campaign contributors is still undue influence. In his survey of current American political campaign Internet and web usage, David C. King concludes that, despite growing innovation in its use, the web is unlikely to change the way members of Congress deliberate (King 2002, 115).

For e-democracy to be an advance of current forms of representative democracy, it needs to incorporate dialogue between representatives and citizens. Clearly in some cases the representative would rather rely on contest than conversation but there may be some instances where there is a need to work through difficult or intractable problems in which an Internet based forum could be used to include citizen input in the dialogue. This contribution would then have to be added to the work of technical consultants, the bureaucracy and the political advisers to reach the kind of considered outcome that Bohm outlines.

Representative democracy currently utilizes information dissemination, information exchange, and political contest. The trustee and agent models of representative democracy (Bishop et al. 2002, Mansbridge 1998) primarily employ information dissemination. In the trustee model, a citizen communicates with his or her representative primarily through voting. The citizen entrusts daily governmental decisions to the representative. Although it is under-utilized, the representative has an opportunity to communicate decisions and decision rationale to the con-
stituency, making greater use of information exchange. In the agent model as proposed by some e-democracy advocates (Latham 2001; see also Bishop et al. 2002) the citizen informs his or her representative about preferences regarding specific governmental actions and the representative undertakes to act on it. Political contest remains the cornerstone of current representative democratic practice as interest groups and representatives negotiate and compromise toward political decisions. Despite claims of more consultative government, most interactive governmental forums such as town meetings and public hearings exemplify political contest, employing discussion as their primary communication mode.

Relying on dialogue, political conversation is currently rare. The discerning factor between political contest and political conversation is that political conversation is characterized by a commitment by both the government and citizens to listen to understand with a willingness to change their original position.

To map these distinctions across current practice, e-government and e-democracy, we have developed a framework of communicative mechanisms of governance, a democracy centered and communication driven model that does not shift ultimate decision-making authority. To reflect current practice and the apparent aims of current government e-democracy trials, decision-making authority under this framework remains with the representative. Government representatives would be prudent to explicitly define their decision-making responsibility and authority when utilizing political conversation because as interaction increases, so will expectations for influence and control. However, because of the retention of legitimate decision-making authority in the representative body, increased equality of communication does not necessarily correspond to increased equality in decision-making authority.

**COMMUNICATIVE MECHANISMS OF GOVERNANCE**

Anchored in democracy, our communicative mechanisms of Governance framework (see Figure 3) redefines technology as a communication tool. This framework is devised on the quadrant to remove any implied scale from less to more democracy. The shaded three quadrants show the modes of communication that currently dominate in representative democracies; that are carried out without the aid of new technology but that new technology could be applied to without challenging the existing practice. The quadrant format also does not imply that gover-
nance communication can only operate in one quadrant. For example, information dissemination and exchange would be a significant preliminary to political contest and political conversation. On line, or on the Internet, delivery may increase availability and add a new opportunity but does not provide a qualitative shift in representative democracy.

**CONCLUSION**

Democratisation is usually a term applied to developing countries or to former dictatorships or totalitarian regimes (Grugel 2002). The term
can also be usefully applied to existing western liberal democracies to look at the phenomenon, of which there are a number of examples in this paper, of governments attempting to make existing representative democracy more democratic.

As political scientists, we need to understand the phenomenon of government initiated e-government and e-democracy. There is a growing implication that the move to deliver government services via the Internet will also alter the nature of representative democracy itself—a transformation from e-government to e-democracy. This trend does not take sufficient account, however, of the institutional structure of representative democracy and the differing modes of communication required. If we look for example at the Queensland initiatives, they are placed firmly within the institutions of representative democracy and designed primarily to reflect well on the activities of the current Labor administration. This is not a criticism. It only reaffirms the initiative as part of ‘business as usual’ in terms of party government in a representative democracy. The initiatives reinforce the existing structure by showing that the representatives are listening to the public. Like other initiatives of the government, it is designed to restore faith in existing institutions, albeit by novel means. As we can see these initiatives may provide an impetus that can meet the aim of building trust in government. They do not, as yet, offer an advance in democracy to the point where the label ‘e-democracy’ connotes a qualitative advance on the traditional representative democratic compromise.

The challenge for the technologists, represented in our framework by the unshaded fourth quadrant, is to devise a system that seeks and promotes dialogue within a representative institutional context and that still leaves ultimate decision-making to the elected representatives. This would certainly be a qualitative advance in representative democratic practice by incorporating aspects of the agent model with representative’s current trustee status in response to the criticism that the current political discourse is somehow ‘broken’ (Kane and Patapan 2004; Latham 2001). It could also facilitate an e-democracy that is not merely new technology applied to old techniques but a new kind of politics.

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1. The first comment is by Microsoft’s Bill Gates, the second by IBM’s Thomas Watson. Both benefited, considerably in Gates’ case, by being wrong. It was Alfred Lord Tennyson, British poet and statesman who had the optimistic response to the arrival of the Telegraph (reported in *Time* 1995, issue 12).


4. There has been no change in regime or to the bureaucracy’s high level of commitment to the new technology between 2002 and 2003. This dramatic slip may point to a methodological problem with the ‘snapshot’ technique West had to adopt to cover so many sites. A temporary problem with the technology could mean, for example, that ‘accessibility’ is recorded lower than the optimal design standard, skewing the overall rank.

5. While there is no absolute standard by which to measure democracy The Freedom House indicators are used here as comparative democratic indicators on the basis that they have also been used in other well known studies. See for example Lawrence LeDuc, Richard Niemi and Pippa Norris (eds.). Comparing Democracies 2, Sage London 2002.

6. Steven Clift was the originator of the ground-breaking Minnesota e-democracy site and has been a frequent speaker at conferences and consultant to governments on the application of new technology.

7. ‘The Smart State’ is the current government’s strategic slogan to attract high tech businesses to the region.

8. The Washington Post held an on-line forum for Democrat candidates seeking party nomination to run for President in 2004 and needed to resort to a system of double posting. Columnist Gene Weingarten reported, in an amusing column, the sorts of questions that did not get to the candidates. Most examples were made up to reflect the style but he included one verbatim: “Sen. Lieberman, could God microwave a burrito so hot that He himself could not eat it?” (Washington Post Magazine, November 30, 2003 p. 7).


10. This is often no easy task. The Queensland initiative, for example, was the result of a campaign promise by the Premier that, as *The Smart State*, Queensland would have an e-democracy trial. What it might entail, how it was to be developed, what the potential pitfalls were, was left to government officers to sort out.

11. “They have a unique perspective on the world that encourages them to gather innovative ideas and applications from far away places and adapt them to their very practical cultures. In North America and Europe, sometimes you are too close to the action to see what is really important or gain the perspective required to fully appreciate what really works” (Clift 2002).

12. CBS new reported in June 4 2003: “The Dean Meetup group is already having an impact where it really matters—fund-raising. So far, the Meetuppies have contributed almost $400,000 to the campaign. Over $1.25 million has been raised online, says [Campaign Manager Joe] Trippi. The ‘Meetup Challenge’ was started in March by a New York member who asked others to send in checks for $10.01. (The extra penny
made it easy for the donations from Meetuppies to be tracked.) Trippi says they’ve re-
ceived thousands of contributions as a result.” (CBS 2003)

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