E-GOVERNANCE to E-DEMOCRACY:

EXAMINING THE EVOLUTION

Prepared by

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**PROLOGUE**

This is the Final paper in a series of five reports assessing international developments in the policies and public administration issues now driving e-government, e-governance and e-democracy. As e-government principles and practices have been applied in the past few years it has been clear that fundamental governance issues determine the workability of the application of e-services delivery and e-programs. This fifth report addresses the evolution of e-governance to e-democracy in our growing global information society.

The paper looks at the e-democracy movement and how government is responding to this new trend. Attention is paid to some of the academic materials now emerging on the subject matter of e-democracy and relevant materials on the subject of democracy itself. The current report was prepared under the auspices of the Commonwealth Centre for e-Governance and the sponsorship of Telecommunications and Informatics Services of Public Works and Government services Canada. Cathia Gilbert, Research Fellow of CCEG, is thanked for her major contributions to the preparation and writing of this report.

**INTRODUCTION**

This fifth report in the series on policies driving e-government, illustrates how e-democracy flows from e-governance. The evolution of e-democracy is analyzed and an overview of the issues presented for discussion and debate. E-democracy is explored as a subset to the greater, and more important, philosophical topic of democracy itself. Thus, the paper begins with a discussion of the various forms of democracy and how these have evolved from Athenian times to the present. This sets the framework for an assessment of whether or not e-democracy shall be a natural extension of representative and liberal democracy, as practiced today in most western countries. Does the evolution of e-democracy practices, such as online consultations, enhance the current system whereby the polity governs society, and continues to have limited and controlled input from the citizen, or shall we see the evolution of a new form of democracy? These are pressing issues for modern governments as the new technologies are contributing to the creation of faster communications, the sharing of information and knowledge, and the emergence of new forms of our respective cultures.

These reports to date represent guidelines for policy implementations for e-government that can be used by governments, whether they are developed or developing countries. This paper addresses some of the changes we are witnessing as the e-democracy movement grows. Networked communities are quickly evolving through the Internet, and citizens are increasingly using the new technologies to organize themselves so their voices can be heard, and to develop tools to attempt to influence government policy and programs at the political and public administration level.
Writers and researchers, analyzing and assessing the emergence of e-democracy, often leave out the broader philosophical nature of democracy itself. For purposes of this paper it is important to put the whole question of how ICTs will be used to further engage the citizenry into a wider context of democracy as we practice it. There are different schools of thought as to whether ICTs will change the nature of democracy, or if ICTs will simply result in an extension of democracy we now practice and understand.

There has been much talk in recent years of public cynicism toward politicians and public officials. Much of this is based, amongst other reasons, on a lack of knowledge and understanding of the inner workings of government, including the public service and legislative arm. This combined with the lack of government programs, in many instances, to inform people of what the government is doing, or to engage people in the development of public policy are only some of the many symptoms of why there is such growing cynicism in the public in the last two decades. The reasons for the cynicism are wide and diverse, and it is not the role of this paper to come to conclusions about this prevailing public attitude, but to suggest that the new ICTs could contribute to creating renewed faith in government bodies through the creation of an interactive government engaged in wide dialogue with an interactive citizenry.

The important issue to hand is that there be a vigorous debate and discussion about the nature of democracy and how all our new technologies can be used to produce a more engaged and interactive citizenry. Such an achievement is going to take commitment and hard work by many sectors of society, not solely governments or legislative bodies (the latter being the most resistant to change). Any movement forward can only be an improvement for elected officials, public sector officials, and the public itself. This is a difficult transition to make as, traditionally, most democratic governments have relied on interest groups, experts, and academics to assist them with the input of new legislation, legislation to be amended, regulations, or public policy.

To make significant changes that would draw the citizenry more widely into the process requires commitment and attitudinal change. Cost factors also come to bear on this as well as the question of how to engage people for their input and opinion. Referendums, offline and online, could be one first step towards bringing the wider public into the whole process of government.

However, this raises an even more fundamental question: Does the public want to be more engaged in government or do they simply want the opportunity to make their views known every once in awhile? If governments do engage the public more frequently into public debate over issues of the day, how often do they do this? What mechanisms will be available to facilitate this process? How often should referendums be used and what subject matters should be considered priorities for referendums? What institutions within government need to be set up to make the wider transition to e-democracy beyond online voting and online consultations?

These are just a few questions that need to be addressed and scoped out if we are to move to a new form of democratic participation and beyond online voting (very limited at the
moment) and online consultations (at a very nascent stage). Groups and individuals outside government are developing their online tools and methodology to create different methodologies of e-democracy in order to influence governments and the issues of the day. Online activists and interested citizens alike also use e-democracy tools to enhance democracy within their own groups and amongst themselves. Thus, we see a culture of a different approach to traditional democracy developing outside the sphere of government circles (with some input into government, and some politicians making effective use of ICTs to further their political goals) while governments make tentative steps to move into the arena.

Governments are traditionally conservative and slow to move due to the nature of their organizations and the duty to take all interests of society into consideration when undertaking change. For the moment there is a difference in cultures occurring and a wide gap between what individuals and groups are doing online and what governments are currently capable of doing online, especially in their relationships with the public.

The challenge of governments in the next few years will be to set out mechanisms on how to embrace more of the public into the decision-making process. More importantly governments, especially the elected bodies, need to take a leadership role in engaging the public in wide debate on how, or if, ICTs can and should change our current dynamics of democracy. For while many might argue that being online is crucial for politicians to continue to get elected, the evidence does not point to this being a deciding factor at this time. The debate is a fluid one. We all need to become partners in a debate on the nature of democracy in our very changed world, which will then lead to ways and means whereby ICTs can be strategic tools for the democratic process. Governments are concerned about the decline in public approval of their institutions. There are tools available that can help reverse this attitude – it is now a question of how extensively these tools can be used to effect this change. As this Report shows, it is becoming increasingly important to engage the citizen. Tools for consultation are still run from the top down but, if done properly, the goals of an interactive government and an interactive citizenry can be reached.

Democracy as practiced now by many countries is an evolving concept. The principles and practice of democratic ideals vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but underpinning all democracies are the underlying tenets of liberal democracy as evolved in the past two to three hundred years. There is representative democracy (and many electoral and legislative forms of this type of democracy), participatory democracy (practiced in some jurisdictions, such as the town hall meetings tradition in the United States), and direct democracy (the closest example of this today is the practice of decisions of national importance by a referendum amongst the electorate.)

These are but a few examples. There is a hint that the evolution of e-democracy could take us into a new form of democracy, which would reflect a wider voice of the public. But there is no clear vision of what such a democracy would entail, and how it would differ from current practices or reflect the overall society.
In our current system of representative democracy, elected officials, and the institutions adopted from this system, have been the traditional means in recent times of governing in the interests of society. So the question is: will ICTs and the tools that continue to be developed enable people to have access to more information (often a negative if there is too much information or a lack of organization or critical skills to assess the importance of the information that can then be turned into knowledge) and to have the ability to better communicate with government? Both these abilities could be a result of the rapid transformation of our collective societies because of the emergence of these information and communication technologies.

However, as we have learned, technology is only a medium and a driver of new and important trends in society to the extent that they are driven by new ideas, conceptual constructs that contain innovation and creativity. Technology is not the creator of change, but is simply a tool. Usage of technologies, no matter their form, result in cultural evolutions because of the way that people adapt them. Implementation of new technologies may change the way societies organize and administer themselves, but they are never the driver of ideas, only the facilitator. Original ideas come from the mind of one person or from collective debate that then drives philosophical, cultural, societal, organizational, and administrative change. Thus, the usage of ICTs for the purposes of e-democracy principles, as articulated to date, is only the beginning, and simply one tool, on the road to possible new forms of democracy. It is how we use this tool and the way in which we frame the debate that will result in these new forms and an extension of our current structures of democracy.

Whatever the outcome of the debate, it is becoming apparent that the emergence of e-democracy is starting to have some impact on both governments and society. It is the continued practice of e-democracy, the development of new tools and ideas, and a debate on the overall subject of democracy, which will bring us to a possible new plateau of a system of democracy that will reflect our increasingly changing culture and societies. This is not a suggestion to change what we have, but to build on the strength of the forms of democracy that have been developed over the past centuries.

**E-DEMOCRACY: A CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION**

Some e-democracy advocates, such as Steven Clift and author Howard Rheingold, believe that if parliaments and other elected bodies do not institute reforms to develop e-democracy mechanisms there will be severe political consequences, such as political candidates seeking office who do not use online technologies to deal with the voters will not be elected.¹ These views are based on the belief that the online generation expect their leaders to communicate to them in this new generation’s medium of use.

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¹ Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerized World*, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1993
These arguments assume that there are a host of citizens arming themselves with the tools to have a direct influence on legislative and policy development, and who also have the will and desire to engage in the emerging e-democracy process. However, the current literature does not reflect any empirical evidence that there is a significant shift towards citizen engagement in the political process due to ICTs. In fact, democracy is as threatened in developed countries by a laissez-faire attitude that leads to inequalities, and power becomes concentrated in the hands of specialized groups. Recognizing this to some degree, Steven Clift in his work has also focused on building online communities to mobilize like-minded individuals around the world, to increase their communication with each other in regard to issues of the day so that their voices may be heard.

Officials in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom are seeking ways to combat voter apathy, especially because of the declining engagement amongst young people. For example, in the UK, only 59.7% of voters voted in the last general election, and less than 30% of young people under 30. Some argue that this is rather a political problem, and there will not be significant shifts to new forms of democracy or participation by the citizenry because of ICTs. They suggest instead that the new ICTs will serve only to strengthen existing democratic institutions, but not dramatically change the legislative bodies of public sector institutions.

On the other extreme end of the spectrum, some contend that while the Internet provides new sources of information for those who are interested in political affairs, they remain skeptical about its potential to transform the participation of the citizenry. These authors posit that it will be business as usual and that the new ICTs will not create the great revival of democracy as argued by proponents above. Others argue that social and economic biases will continue on the Internet, further marginalizing those who have little interest in or knowledge of public affairs. Michael Margolis and David Resnick, authors of *Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace Revolution* insist that initial expectations for such a democratic revival were short-lived and simply produced “politics as usual”.

The electronic form of governance, of which e-democracy is an extension, emerges in the midst of various theories about governance, one of which is the concept evolved by French philosopher Michel Foucault, of “governmentality,” wherein he articulated a kind of rationality integral to the art of government. Foucault was concerned with the “how” of governing, and for him governmentality was a “way or system of thinking about the
nature of the practice of government.” He used “rationality of government” interchangeably with “art of government”, to include who can govern, what governing is, what or who is governed.  For him the most significant development in modern government, and by extension modern democracy, is the introduction of economy as the main objective of political practice, and population as representing the end or goal of government, with the apparatuses of security as its essential mechanism. But what of the concept of democracy itself and how does this align with the new online movement for increased participation by the citizen?

THEORIES OF DEMOCRACY

Theories of democracy are as numerous as those thinkers who have written about it through the ages. So too the concept of the citizen and exactly who is to be included within the term has changed dramatically since articulated in ancient Athens. There are many conflicting interpretations of what constitutes a democracy, the meaning of political participation, representation, and scope of citizens’ capacity to choose freely. Historically, the city-state of Athens was the first democratic state that engaged in direct democracy from the citizenry. In the close to 200 years that democracy did thrive in Athens there were different evolutions of how it engaged in democratic practices. At the height of their practices of democracy, 6,000 to 8,000 citizens of Athens would gather almost weekly to form a consensus on legislative issues.

On first blush it appears this system was an ideal democracy. However, this was not a true democracy as we understand it today as vast numbers of citizens of Athens were excluded. Those not participating were the slaves and members of families who were not recent citizens of the City but considered immigrants (an immigrant family could be one that arrived in Athens even as much as four generations or more earlier). Women were also excluded, thus eliminating over half the population from the process. However, the democratic practice in ancient Athens is an early, though flawed, example of the practice of direct democracy and the reaching of consensus amongst the participants.

Throughout the centuries, democracy has undergone major changes, as the size of the citizenry has evolved from a narrow, exclusively defined body that participated in a collective will within a small city-state, to a genuinely universal suffrage in many countries, and a metamorphosis of ancient democracy into what is today called a representative, liberal democracy. Academic author Robert Dahl argues that this latter form of democracy leads to both accountable and feasible government, with the potential of stability over large territories and periods of time.

The writer and theorist, Carol Gould, on the other hand, maintains that a theory of democracy is necessary that both elaborates freedom and equality, and effectuates them

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9 Michael Foucault, supra p.202
in practice, arguing that the form of decision-making should be participatory to the extent feasible, and representative otherwise.  

The author and philosopher Alain Touraine, distrusting participatory democracy as lacking in wisdom, and dissatisfied with deliberative democracy, advocates the need for a liberating (representative) democracy – where there is a “democratic will to enable those who are subordinate and dependent to act freely and to discuss rights and guarantees on equal terms with those who possess economic, political, and cultural resources.”  He proposes this as a limitation on what would otherwise lead to the omnipotence of those who control the financial and information resources.

In such a regime, the concept of citizenship is based on a guarantee that all citizens of a country have the same legal and political rights, regardless of their social, religious, or ethnic background. This concept also carries the notion of an actively responsible individual, though he further cautions that in modernized societies, it is in danger of being reduced to the “freedom to consume in the political marketplace.”

The theoretical framework, to be used in this Report, is the definition of democracy by Joseph Schumpeter who defines representative or liberal democracy in terms of its structural characteristics, as follows:

“ 1. **Pluralistic competition** among parties and individuals for all positions of government power;

2. **Participation** among equal citizens in the selection of parties and representatives through free, fair and periodic elections; and

3. **Civil and political liberties** to speak, publish, assemble, and organize, as necessary conditions to ensure effective competition and participation.”

Point one allows citizens to choose from alternative candidates. Point two allows for periodic elections that translate votes into seats in government, promoting transparency, so that representatives can be held accountable for their actions. Point three allows for multiple sources of information so that citizens can make informed choices. This model of democracy is useful to a discussion of electronic governance and electronic democracy in that it gives equal weight to the value of mass participation as to the other two core democratic functions of politics.

Within this framework, and reflecting the classical liberal view of the role of parliament in representative democracy, government websites (though not specifically envisioned by Schumpeter), as a means of creating an informed citizenry, should therefore ideally serve two primary functions: “the ‘top down’ provision of information from the legislature to

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13 Alain Touraine, 1997, p.11
14 Ibid, 1997, p.19
the public, and a ‘bottom up’ channel of communication from the public to the elected members”. This also includes interactive communication between government agencies and departments and the public. There have been arguments for many ways in which government websites and other features of the new ICTs have the potential to increase the democratic participation of the citizen. The debate is heated but it remains difficult to find systematic comparative evidence.

James Fishkin outlines four conditions that must exist for a greater engagement by the citizen:

- political equality,
- deliberation,
- participation, and
- non-tyranny (that includes the tyranny of the majority).

A system that achieved all four conditions simultaneously he calls a “democracy of civic engagement”.  

The OECD Public Administration (PUMA) Group that has been conducting extensive studies on e-government and e-democracy has articulated three main components of governments in their program evolutions, policy and legislative implementations, required for online interactions between government and the citizen:

- information,
- active participation and
- consultation.

Many governments have pledged to move in this direction but movement towards results is slow. This may be partly explained due to the hierarchical nature of organizations and the current role of representative government in these democracies. External groups and individuals on an international scale are working to change this dynamic (as will be illustrated below.) Governments are moving at a slower and different pace than those groups and citizens who are using the Internet to try to influence the evolution of policy and legislation.

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the relative merits of the various forms of democracy, including the different forms of representative democracy as practiced in different countries, nor whether or not it would benefit the society for the citizen to have a greater role in the decision-making processes of government, but rather to explore whether there is a potential for increasing that role through the use of the new ICTs and e-democracy. Do they have the prospect of increasing the completeness of the debate on the issues and the public’s engagement with it? And if so, are those who participate statistically representative of the entire citizenry? The question as to whether or not the

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movement of governments online and a growing influence of the citizen online working to influence government policy and legislative development, will result in new forms of democracy will not be answered for a long time. Only historical evolutions and changes in society in the coming decades will decide the question. What can be stated at this juncture is that ICTs are beginning to shape the form of democracy citizens now practice, albeit in a small, but significant, way.

**E-DEMOCRACY: WHAT IS IT?**

There are as many interpretations of what constitutes e-democracy as there are interpretations of democracy. And because e-democracy is in its beginning stages, there is much confusion about what it encompasses and how to clearly define it.

Steven Clift, of DO Wire, is an acknowledged expert and leader in the worldwide e-democracy movement. He describes e-democracy as referring to “how the Internet can be used to enhance our democratic processes and provide increased opportunities for individuals and communities to interact with government and for the government to seek input from the community” (democracy online http://www.dowire.org). Characteristics of the Internet which he feels support e-democracy are that it provides opportunity to participate in debates as they happen, participation is less limited by geography, disability or networks, and it facilitates the access to information and provision of input by individuals and groups who previously had not been included in these debates.

Another organization that specializes in e-democracy is the International Teledemocracy Centre in Scotland. Their stated goal is to strengthen democracy through the use of innovative ICT to deliver improved democratic decision-making processes, thereby increasing citizen participation – specifically through the use of electronic consultation and electronic petitions. This is undertaken within a backdrop of the devolution of control to the Scottish Parliament for its own domestic legislation. The Centre takes its cue from the OECD study on e-government and e-democracy, concentrating on the last two of the three types of interaction outlined in the OECD’s study: a two-way relationship where citizens are given the opportunity to give feedback on issues; and a relationship based on partnership where citizens are actively engaged in the policy-making process.

The UK-based Dialogue by Design, summarily defines e-democracy as “the use of computers to enhance the democratic process.” As a proponent of its own data management software to be used in the e-consultation process, it is clearly unapologetic in its view that ICTs have the potential to transform the political world as dramatically as the invention of the printing press did over five hundred years ago. 17

Åke Grönlund, from the Umeå University in Sweden, however, is concerned that

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17 www.dialoguebydesign.com
definitions of e-democracy often focus on ICT use and projects, rather than on
democratic processes and institutional innovation. In order that the term ‘e-democracy’
does not become merely a convenient shorthand for ICT use in democratic processes, he
argues that it should be assessed in terms of its defining processes, not to what extent
ICTs are used. He notes that as e-government is still in its early days, e-democracy is a
marginal occurrence, but he does not discount its potential for the future, though which
initiatives will be successful and which directions e-democracy will take will depend on
the actions by many different actors.

**RELATIONSHIP TO E-GOVERNANCE**

Some proponents of e-government in Canada and internationally have dispensed with the
term ‘e-governance’. For many e-government is used to encompass all electronic
activities and programs, with e-democracy included as a ‘growing’ part of e-government.
Terms such as ‘digital government’ and ‘digital voice’ have more and more come into
use instead. E-democracy is treated more as a result than as an equally important part of
the equation. The emphasis on the use of ICTs by government and elected officials in the
business of government often overshadows the real difficulties involved in online citizen
engagement, which is presented almost as an extension of the more traditional
consultation methods. In fact, the subject of online consultation is actually a work in
progress and we are witnessing the early stages of its growth.

A pilot on online consultation was recently completed by the Centre for Collaborative
Government, in conjunction with the Department of Canadian Heritage, to develop and
test the concept of a ‘Digital Commons’: “a place where Canadians can openly discuss,
debate and share issues and experiences electronically in an open forum.” The discussion
agenda, determined by the government, was highly controlled and run by them, with the
“focus on the role of government and of elected officials as participants in such a space.”
While the final report from the consultation contains recommendations for an e-
democracy framework by doing more pilots, the emphasis of the pilot undertaken was on
“government comfort and familiarity with online citizen engagement” rather than from
the viewpoint of the citizen’s participation in governance.

Their appears to be a method of enabling government to adapt gradually to the idea of
citizen engagement, and it may well be argued that this approach is needed in order to
move government and politicians into an acceptance of this new reality. The downside,
however, is that although their report constantly speaks of increasing citizen engagement,
it proceeds from the top-down perspective rather than incorporating the citizen’s
viewpoint.

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Conference, Glasgow, 2002

19 See web site, <www.crossingboundaries.ca> 1/04/03
Gilles Paquet, of the University of Ottawa Centre on Governance, views governance in relation to organizations, moving from centralized to distributed governance. In his view,

“e-government presents a real transformation in democratic governance, including design, decision-making and service delivery capabilities. E-governance refers to new processes of coordination made possible or even necessary by the advent of technology – and the spreading of online activities in particular. As a result, e-government refers to an IT-led reconfiguration of public sector governance – and how knowledge, power and purpose are redistributed in light of new technological realities.”

The Internet has certainly brought about a decentralization of power in one respect. In the wired world, individuals can now make their own choices as to which authorities and information sources they will accept. It may be argued that this is leading to a greater democratization of knowledge, empowerment of the individual, and the potential for more informed interactions between the citizenry and organizations, including government. Moreover, since individuals now have ready access to a variety of information resources, governments have to adopt new proactive measures to compile and disseminate information in a competitive information environment.

Effective ability to access government information, and to use information as a tool in all aspects of one’s life, has become more and more vital in today’s society. Recent research, as illustrated in an earlier paper in this series, into e-government practices, applications, and successes and failures of government web sites illustrates the following:

1. E-democracy is a growing trend amongst outside groups, but most governments are still very much struggling with the concept.

2. E-governance is changing the ways in which government does business with the public and, in the process, is creating demand for some form of participation from the citizen. This gives some credence to the ongoing thinking that e-governance will eventually result in some form of e-democracy.

3. E-democracy movements are founded on information precepts and engage in the sharing and developing of knowledge.

4. For the citizen to influence government policy, programs or policy evolution, the creation and sharing of knowledge by governments with the public will become mandatory.

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CULTURAL CLIMATE FOR E-DEMOCRACY

Discussions of e-government and e-governance inevitably lead to the question of citizen participation. This can take many forms and different subject headings, such as participatory democracy, e-participation, teledemocracy, and e-democracy. The latter has come to be the umbrella term for citizen participation in the political, bureaucratic and legislative process.

While there are many sites on the Internet where citizens may organize their own petitions, some governments such as Scotland and Queensland, Australia are exploring ways to adapt the legal right to petition the government to the online medium. One regional government in Jutland, Denmark is building a system whereby local citizens will be notified by email when the government plans to take action on an issue in which they have indicated an interest.

Two e-democracy advocates, Stephen Coleman, of the Institute for Internet Research, Oxford and John Gøtze, in the Swedish Government, argue that the main thrusts of e-democracy for legislators and public administrators will be online voting and online consultations. Online consultation is mostly restricted to the bureaucratic side of government in many countries, but in jurisdictions like the US, the UK, and Sweden, it refers to consultations between the citizenry and the political side of government as well.

The e-democracy movement is driven by the emergence of ICTs that allow swift exchange of communications, the ability to share information and build communities of networks of people and groups who, amongst other things, share common interests and ideologies. What once took months or years to turn into an issue can now occur in less than a day. The Internet is becoming more and more an important organizational tool for all manner of groups and citizens who, in the past, had a difficult time either being heard by the government or influencing policy.

The size and timeliness of the international protests over the globalization policies of the OECD and the WTO were due to groups being able to organize themselves over the Internet, mobilize support for the issues, and exchange information and communicate messages in real time. In Seattle, Washington D.C., and Prague, the initial G8 protests were organized both off line and online, but it was the Internet that gave this movement the international momentum to make it the effective demonstration, and the somewhat collective voice of outsiders, that it became. It has become the symbol not only for the voices able to speak from the Internet, but of the fact that the citizenry has found a tool by which they can bypass all the normal channels of government.

Many people talk about the “individual” being in control, or having great power because of the ability to tap into the world through the keyboard. It has also been identified as the power of the consumer to buy the product he wants, or read the online newspaper of

choice. But more central to this development is the degree to which people can communicate, form opinions, make judgments from available data, and then act upon them. The Internet is a medium that allows ideas to flow among thousands of channels, a form of “capillary action”, that the French philosopher Michel Foucault viewed in the multiple and decentralized way that power is exercised. People are empowered not because one can get onto the Internet and buy a product, read a newspaper or research out some knowledge, but by the ability to talk back (true interactivity), dialogue, and go to whatever source an individual wants to choose.

This is not to say there are thousands upon thousands of people out there engaged in political activism. But there are legions of people who are engaging in conversation (or whatever activity they choose). Many of these people are not restrained by the dictates of mass media. In today's wired world, with the increased demand for more and faster information, many would say that the interactive citizen has evolved from what Manuel Castells, author of “The Internet Galaxy” termed “virtual communitarians” (people who use ICTs for social organization), and that the Internet has put new power and knowledge into the hands of the citizen.

In practice, one of the primary functions of government has been the creation and dissemination of information. Governments have always been considered to be the largest library in any jurisdiction because of the enormity of their information holdings. Perhaps the Internet is now the largest library in the world given the billions of web pages, joined-up chat rooms, newsgroups, listservs, etc. As a result, a citizenry that is able to seek and obtain information and knowledge from any place in the world through the Internet will, in all likelihood, also expect more from government.

Current research indicates that at this stage of development few governments have effectively been able to involve their citizenry electronically in the democratic process in any great numbers. Many governments have reached a stage where they are able to dispense information more effectively, which often passes as a means of enhancing the democratic process. But there are also some government initiatives seeking to help citizens to get online, seek feedback on government reports online, and develop listservs and discussion groups to elicit the views of the citizens. There are many groups actively participating in online activities in the hope of influencing government policies. One of these is Open Democracy which describes its goal as a “true arena for democratic change, for closing the distance between people and power, influencing global policy and … share knowledge across borders and differences.”

According to Steven Clift, Democracy Online consultant in Minnesota, those engaged in online activities involving social or political changes see the Internet as a medium to

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23 <http://www.dowire.org>
25 Manuel Castells, The Internet Galaxy, Oxford University Press, 2001
26 <http://www.opendemocracy.net/about/index.jsp>
See also Appendix A for list of web sites promoting/engaging in e-democracy.
foster, enhance, and change the way people have traditionally engaged in the democratic process. The Internet is a medium that could result in hundreds of thousands of people around the world participating in the political process as citizen politicians. However, the reality and the promise of what could occur are far apart.

There is the question as to whether citizens would in fact use the Internet tool to become more involved with the decision-making process of government, if they were given the opportunity. This question may likewise be reflected in an emerging trend, which surfaced in a sample survey, showing that people are increasingly spending more time in isolation sitting in front of their terminals. A survey in 2000, of 4,113 adults, conducted by Stanford University’s Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society, found that "55% of Americans have access to the Internet at work or at home, and approximately 20% of regular Internet users spend more than 5 hours a week online. Of those 20%, 13% spend less time with family and friends, 8% attend fewer social events, and 25% spend more time working at home in addition to spending a full day at the office." 27

Another finding of that study also corroborates the UCLA’s Center for Communication Policy’s latest study of Internet usage, that the more than 70% of Americans who use the Internet now consider online technology to be their most important source of information, ranking it higher as an information source than all other media, including newspapers and television. 28 Indeed, a majority of US Internet users (surveyed by the Markle Foundation as part of their Internet Accountability study) viewed the web as a “library” and not an online shopping mall.

But whether this will translate into a greater involvement in political or government affairs remains to be seen, and there are conflicting studies. A survey conducted in 2002 by the Forrester Consultancy Group found that, despite the numerous programs to implement e-government in Great Britain, only 10% of the population are going online for government services, while at the same time online retail sales have skyrocketed to one billion pounds sterling a year. Clearly, the British would rather go shopping. 29

Without doubt, the Internet has been a tool of enrichment for large numbers of the population. It has allowed diversity, the rise of the entrepreneur, the mushrooming of home businesses, the bringing together of family and friends through instant communications. It has also been a voice for many who previously did not have the means to express themselves because prior media of the expression of communication have been controlled by the few. But the question remains as to whether the Internet too will eventually become another medium of expression also controlled by the few or a free-for-all of opinion and bias not grounded in factual or thoughtful discussion. While the Internet has become more and more an intrinsic part of our cultures, nevertheless there are serious issues to be dealt with, especially that of the digital divide.

29 *The Economist*, January 4, 2003, Pg. 3
Modern societies and governments have traditionally operated on a hierarchical model of information flow and interaction. So, for the most part, have traditional information technologies. Because new technologies have in the past influenced the evolution of society and, as a consequence, the nature of government, it is anticipated by many that ICTs will contribute to an increased interactivity with the public. The potential for wide change in the e-governance area now exists beyond simply e-government service delivery, but also in the promise of wider interaction with the citizen. What this will entail and the speed with which it may be accomplished is still very uncertain. Indeed, evidence of the lack of programs and initiatives in many jurisdictions for actively engaging the citizenry through electronic means speaks to its much lower priority for government than the electronic delivery of services, and fuels the assertion by many others that it will simply be “business as usual” for governments.

However, the problem is not necessarily lack of government action in making widespread commitments to conducting online consultations (though at the political level in many countries there is still much reluctance to change the “status quo”). One of the major problems in government departments and agencies in achieving this goal is simply the lack of financial and human resources to create a “back office” that would take care of all the activity that would occur once online consultations are undertaken on a regular basis.

On the other hand, the January 24, 2003 issue of the *Economist*, which surveyed a number of developments brought about by the new ICTs, emphasizes the promise and potentiality of these technologies to bring about a shift in power to the ordinary citizen:

“…every big change in communication technology, from the printing press to television, has eventually produced big, and often unexpected, changes in politics. As the internet becomes mobile and ubiquitous, it will bring about changes of its own. Precisely what these will be is not yet clear, but the earliest claims of cyber-dreamers – that the internet will produce a shift of power away from political elites to ordinary citizens – may well become reality.” 30

A key issue that must be addressed as part of any discussion on e-democracy is that of the digital divide, as there can be vast disparities between those who will benefit from access to the new technologies and those who are either technologically illiterate or do not have the financial means to go online. Not only have the new ICTs changed the economy, whereby technological literacy and access have become more and more vital, but such a divide, perpetuated by economic barriers, will preclude many from engaging in the e-democratic process.

A report published by Citizens Online, a registered charity in the UK established to explore the social and cultural impact of the internet on society, revealed that three times as many well-off families in the UK are going online for the first time as those with low incomes. 31

30 <http://www.economist.com/surveys/showsurvey.cfm?issue=20030125>
31 <http://www.citizensonline.org.uk/>
Interestingly, this group, which is committed to universal access and tackling the issues of the digital divide, is funded by the private sector and not by government. Similar results concerning income-related home access were reported in a recent study done in Canada by the survey company Ekos: 32

- while home access increased across all groups, growth rates were more significant in upper income households.
- a majority of upper income households (81% with $80-99K and 83% with $100K and over) and upper middle income households (60% with $40-59K and 72% with $60-79K) have home access;
- less than half (46%) of lower middle income households ($20-39K) and a little over one in three (35%) of lower income households (less than $20K) have home access;
- the division of home access based on income has continued to widen between upper and lower income households from a 39 point gap in 1997 to a 48 point gap in 2001.

Canada, the United States, Britain, Denmark and Sweden, among others, have implemented community access programs to attempt to bridge this divide in some measure. Though by no means do they fully resolve the issue of the digital divide, these programs seek to provide free internet access for every citizen by establishing hook-ups in public libraries, schools, community centers and kiosks. There are almost weekly press releases by Industry Canada announcing the establishment of more public access points in both rural communities and urban areas across Canada. 33 Britain’s goal is to have a public access point no farther than 1 kilometer from every individual in the country, so that government information and service delivery is accessible to all.

A Report released by the US Census Bureau in February, 2002, entitled a Nation OnLine shows that the vast majority of Americans now have access to computers and the Internet in great numbers and on a daily basis. While it paints an optimistic picture of Internet usage, it does not deal with the digital divide.

- “The rate of growth of Internet use in the United States is currently two million new Internet users per month. More than half of the nation is now online.
- Children and teenagers use computers and the Internet more than any other age group.
- 90 percent of children between the ages of 5 and 17 (or 48 million) now use computers.
- 75 percent of 14-17 year olds and 65 percent of 10-13 year olds use the Internet.
- Households with children under the age of 18 are more likely to access the Internet (62 percent) than households with no children (53 percent)

33 <http://www.industrycanada.ca/cmb/welcomeic.nsf/ICPages/NewsReleases>
• Computers in schools substantially narrow the gap in computer usage rates for children from high and low income families.
• Approximately 24 million of the 65 million employed adults who use a computer at their job also work on a computer at home.” 34

A study by the Washington, Pew Internet & American Life Project, released in April, 2002, illustrates the extent of e-government usage in the country:

“While many government site users focus on their personal needs in dealing with government agencies, there is abundant evidence that a new “e-citizenship” is taking hold:
• 42 million Americans have used government web sites to research public policy issues.
• 23 million Americans have used the Internet to send comments to public officials about policy choices.
• 14 million have used government web sites to gather information to help them decide how to cast their votes.
• 13 million have participated in online lobbying campaigns.”35

A similar study of e-government usage in 27 countries around the world, was conducted by the European firm, Taylor Nelson Sofres, with the following findings: 36

• 26% of people globally have used the Internet to either access government information, provide personal information to the government, or transact with e-government services.
• e-government usage varies globally: Norway and Denmark have the highest e-government usage at 53 and 47% respectively, Finland 46%, US 34%, France 18%, Germany and Korea 17%, and Great Britain 11%.

Overall, one might argue that the penetration rate of the internet in a number of countries around the world does create a cultural climate for e-democracy to grow based on the numbers of people online. Email and mailing lists have led to the emergence of virtual communities. Yet, in stark contrast, the Internet’s reach in most of the developing countries ranges only from less than 1-5 % of the total population. For example, in the Philippines it is currently put in the range of 2-3 % and in Nigeria 0.1 %. 37

While some developing nations such as Malaysia, Brazil and Taiwan have made substantial progress, approximately 87% of people online live in post-industrial societies. There are twice as many users in Sweden than across the entirety of Sub-Saharan Africa.

34 US Census Bureau, A Nation Online, Feb.2002, p.2
36 <http://www.europemedia.net/shownews.asp?ArticleID=6556>
The potential is also there for the internet to become dominated by a few large, corporate interests, or subsumed by government regulation that could inhibit the freedoms offered by this new technology. There are efforts by many governments, worried about the potential freedoms a medium such as the Internet brings, to curtail both access and content on the Internet.

Since September 11, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and many other countries have implemented laws making it possible to engage in wide surveillance of citizens. In the US the government is planning to converge databases of public and private sector organizations, in order to track citizens both in the US and abroad. In his annual report, the Privacy Commissioner of Canada warned that privacy rights have been under assault as a result of these new laws. All these inhibiting legislative and regulatory changes could potentially create a climate where we see citizens anxious about their online activity. [This topic matter will be the subject of the next Report, from the Commonwealth Centre for e-Governance, which will make a comparative analysis of the impacts of security laws and amended privacy laws to facilitate the new climate of the war on terrorism. The paper will assess the impact, if any, on e-government in Canada, the USA, Britain and the European Union as a result of these legislative amendments. The paper will be published in late August, 2003 and will be available at: http://www.elecronicgov.net/publications/index.html ]

In Malaysia, the government closed down an Internet publication, Malaysiakini, that advocated e-democracy and robust online public discourse. The Malaysian government has stated their commitment to e-government and freedom on the Internet through their e-government strategy. Yet, according to the publisher of Malaysiakini, it appears the government was nervous about an outlet that did not express views they endorsed. In other words, the clear message from the government was that it was they alone who would set the agenda.

From her perspective through the lens of the digital and democratic divides, Pippa Norris, author of *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide*, argues that optimistic claims that the new ICTs will facilitate a new era of direct democracy, “like a virtual Agora, while attractive… are implausible in practice as soon as we understand who becomes involved in digital politics.” She maintains that it will simply reinforce the activism of the activists, and it is unlikely it will reach the “disengaged, the apathetic, and the uninterested,” further increasing the divisions between the actives and the apathetics.

While the ICTs may have set the stage for the potential of e-democracy to take hold in society, there are many uncertainties and questions that still remain. Is there significant progress towards an e-democracy culture, and will it truly provide representation for all.

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citizens, when there is both unequal access to the technology and unequal technical
capabilities of citizens? The figures above show that there is a definite culture of Internet
usage emerging that creates the environment for e-democracy, but how realistic is it that
it will come into being? Will e-democracy simply be another version of voting, and be
used as a limited means for governments to consult with people on different political and
public sector issues? Will there be a new form of democracy emerging, as this Report
suggests, or will it be an augmentation of representative democracy with an “e” added
on? Will people engage themselves in political and government issues, and will their
voices actually be heard and taken into account, or will the Internet be simply another
tool for politicians and governments to enforce top-down decisions? These are questions
that are central to:

1. the current e-democracy debate;
2. the future of e-democracy itself;
3. and how the form of democracy as we currently know it may evolve into a new
   form of participatory or direct democracy or
4. take a shape we have yet to articulate.

No treatment of e-governance and e-democracy could help but raise these questions.
However, they represent much broader issues than can be effectively covered in this
Report, which instead, is limited to the role of the citizen in the evolving e-governance
structure. The issues above present some of the limitations, but one must also consider
those means that are currently being used to engage the citizen in the decision-making
process.

**THE CITIZEN’S CURRENT ROLE IN GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION**

Our representative form of parliamentary democracy in Canada, the United Kingdom,
Australia, New Zealand and other western democratic governments around the world –
has resulted in the development of specific practices on how to consult with the public on
issues of the day and the development of legislation. Parliament and provincial or state
legislatures create legislation through the Committee process of their respective
assemblies. These Committees invite members of the public to submit briefs and
comments on the bill being considered. In some instances, Parliamentary committees
will travel across the country, holding public hearings to get input from professional
groups and associations, non-governmental organizations, academics, and citizens groups
and individuals with expertise in the specific subject of the proposed legislation.

This process is also followed when the government releases White papers (the
government’s intent on a given issue, of what they propose to do in the way of
legislation) or Green papers (a discussion paper of the various alternatives the
government is considering on a certain issue). In Canada and other countries they are
generally announced in different ways, especially in official government publications and
details given on how to provide input. Ministers’ staff and public administration officers
also ensure that the White paper or Green or other Discussion papers are circulated to
people who should know about it and whose input the government is seeking. This is a very controlled mechanism run from the top. On important pieces of legislation, concerted efforts are made by the government in power to seek input from specific groups or allies of the legislation.

In Canada, since Confederation and the formation of Canada, in 1867, a system has evolved of public sector officials seeking out representatives of vested and specific interest groups from the different regions of the country, who would be invited to Ottawa to take part in discussions. The system tends towards elitism, as the practice has been for favourites to be selected for their input. Except for public meetings, sometimes required by law, and committee meetings across the country on major political issues of the day (such as with the ongoing debates on the Canadian Health Care System or the Constitutional discussions in the late eighties), the average citizen has not been a major factor in public input into legislative and public sector debates. Online consultations being run at the provincial and federal levels in Canada are an attempt to change this process and are tentative steps towards engaging the citizen in the development of the policy making process or input on major issues of the day. Similar activities, in varying degrees, are taking place in many other jurisdictions in the world. While governments continue to work from a top down position there are pressures from outside groups and citizens, using online tools, to change the current system of engagement between the government and the public.

In the last twenty years, the use of opinion polls and focus groups by public sector organizations has become common, but this represents only very limited input from the citizen. Television presents a public forum where political issues of the day may be discussed, and phone-in shows for people to express their opinions. But media programs, including the radio talk shows, are more a medium for listeners to sound their opinions than they are a venue for government to have an educated debate for input on their agendas.

The United States has similar mechanisms but, in addition, have a tradition of town hall meetings as a mechanism for public input into the democratic process. These town hall meetings, originating in the New England states over two centuries ago, have spread across the country. Politicians from the local and state levels are very involved in the process. Town hall meetings are convened on any issue that is relevant to the local town or county. It has been a tradition that robustly involves people in the democratic process. In fact, there has been some suggestion that the wide interest in e-democracy in the United States, where there is growing involvement, stems from this tradition of the town hall meeting.

**APPROACHES TOWARDS INVOLVING THE CITIZEN ONLINE**

An online organization in the US, called *Teledemocracy Action News and Network*, describes their purpose as follows: “We are primarily dedicated to the creative use of
modern technologies (ICTs) and face-to-face deliberative techniques in all forms that
directly empower citizens to have authentic input into political systems at all levels of
governance around the world.” 41 Other groups, such as the Centre for Democracy and
Technology (CDT) in Washington, have a similar goal of getting people more involved in
the democratic process through the use of technological tools. 42

The potential to achieve such a goal may be possible, as can be seen by examples below of
people who are working to get governments to go online and engage the citizen in the
process of government. But for the moment, most of those groups working in an e-
democracy environment are reliant on government and reacting to what government is
doing to create input. There are many others who play active roles but two of the more
well known approaches in developing online communities of e-democracy participants
are those by e-democracy experts, Steven Clift and Ann Macintosh.

The Clift approach is to build a community of networks in which people can engage
themselves in political discourse, develop ways to input into government policy and
decision-making, send people to appropriate sites, and recommend ways to use
technology to be able to influence the process of government. Much of what he does is
from his own perspective, using the means through his newsgroup wire list, Democracy
Online newswire (‘do-wire’)43 tracking developments in e-democracy and sharing them
with colleagues around the world. Clift works with governments to encourage them to
get online, use tools to engage citizens, and use the Internet as a tool for online voting.

The Macintosh approach has been a traditional one of working with governments from an
academic institution to develop tools to help legislators and administrators obtain public
input on issues of the day. Through her International Teledemocracy Centre she has
been engaged in online consultations on a number of policy issues for the Scottish
parliament, developed tools to obtain public input, including programs directed
specifically at youth, and has also worked with the London Council on recent transport
issues. Macintosh also does work with the European Union on their e-democracy
projects.

Although her work is set by the government agenda, hers differs from Clift in that much
of her e-democracy research is done from the perspective of an academic researcher. She
provides in-depth analysis, based on extensive research, on the different projects in which
she is engaged. Clift writes papers and proffers tips and advice from his own
perspective, as an effective advocate who has been responsible for building an
international community of networks dealing with some form of e-democracy. His 2650-
member do-wire list serves to keep the interested subscribers up to date, posts notices of
important events, and points people to web sites, articles, and other newsgroups and
listservs of interest. Clift is proactively developing a culture of e-democracy whilst
Macintosh contributes through the input of researched papers and online consultations
developed through government funding. Her role is not so much an advocate as a

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41 <http://frontpage.auburn.edu/tann/>
42 <http://www.cdt.org>
43 <http://www.e-democracy.org>

23
facilitator, creating an information base of knowledge on the subject matter, which is
made available through the ITC’s web site. ⁴⁴

Some argue that the current focus of governments on providing easily accessible online
services drives the push to e-participation, in that it presents a challenge to those
governments between a consumer’s view of the world and a citizen’s view – the former
focussed on services, the latter on policies, which promotes e-participation and
democracy. ⁴⁵ Governments putting online their legislation, legislative proposals and
background documents on issues may be a start towards bringing more citizens into the
process. But it is still very much a top-down approach by government, as an analysis
shows that the groups and individuals engaged in e-democracy mainly rely on the agenda
set by government and react to what government is doing to create input. This is a
natural extension of our current system of representative democracy.

In Canada there have been tentative steps towards citizen engagement at the federal level
by Human Resources and Development Canada, who conducted a series of workshops in
2001/2 on the possibility of developing online consultations, but these were solely from
the perspective of members of parliament and of the public service. ⁴⁶ Other departments
and agencies such as the Law Reform Commission, Department of Foreign Affairs and
International Trade, Health Canada, Statistics Canada, Department of Indian and
Northern Affairs, and the Library of Parliament have all conducted some form of online
consultation over the past 2 years. The number of responses were not large nor
necessarily a wide representative sampling of the population. However, these online
consultations do represent a tentative step forward.

The Ontario government’s website proclaims its strategy on citizen engagement, claiming
they are “committed to” greater citizen involvement, and outline “possibilities” of what
could be done, with no indication of when or how they intend to develop these, let alone
implement them. ⁴⁷ Most recently, an online consultation was utilized in Ontario to gain
citizen input for the Premier’s throne speech, and again the numbers responding
demonstrated that this method of engaging the citizen is still in its infancy.

ONLINE CONSULTATIONS

Online consultation is a methodology that includes the use of ICTs as part of the process
for obtaining input from the citizen into government policies and initiatives. It continues
to use other traditional offline methods of submitting that input, by complementing rather
than replacing existing structures. There is a multitude of activity in the United States,
especially at the state and local levels. France has many online consultative activities, as
do the Scandinavian countries (see Swedish example below). The State of Queensland in

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⁴⁴ Ann Macintosh, Professor of E-Governance, International Teledemocracy Centre, Napier University,
Edinburgh, Scotland <http://www.itc.org>
⁴⁵ Jeffrey Roy, Centre on Governance, University of Ottawa, at HRDC Workshop “E-Participation from
the Perspective of the Public Service,” October 2001
⁴⁶ Ibid. Also workshop, “E-Participation from the Perspective of Parliamentarians,” March 2002
⁴⁷ <http://www.cio.gov.on.ca>
Australia is developing extensive e-participation tools through use of web sites, kiosks and other mechanisms to extend e-participation. The British government is actively pursuing ways and means to change the current methods of representative democracy and to bring people into the system through the use of the new ICTs.

In July 2002, the UK Government released their e-Democracy Consultation Report, *In the Service of Democracy:* A Consultation Paper on a Policy for E-Democracy, outlining their strategy on how they intend to modernize electoral procedures, and encourage greater citizen participation in policy-making and the processes of democracy:

> “The Government’s e-participation strategy seeks to find ways in which new technologies can be utilised in the democratic process to connect politicians and the public between elections. The proposals seek to provide greater opportunities for consultation and dialogue between government and citizens”.

The report emphasized that the goal remained the improvement of democracy not the promoting of technology. They see technology as an enabler, a tool to achieve policy goals, as opposed to the solution to a problem.

The paper is a consultative document and funds were allocated for both the consultation process and the follow-up reports and implementation. It encourages citizens to send their comments on the proposals to the government, and offers the options of online or offline input – in writing by mail, fax, or e-mail to the Office of the e-Envoy, or by going to the web site: [http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk](http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk) The consultation paper is an ambitious first step towards some form of democratic change from a national government.

The two main thrusts of their democratic reform agenda are e-Participation and e-Voting, and the paper makes a clear distinction between them as follows:

**e-Voting** – the use of ICT to facilitate participation in elections or other ballots under statutory control. This comprises e-voting in:

- elections to the UK, Scottish and European Parliaments, the devolved assemblies and local councils;
- referendums;
- private ballots under statutory control.

This track also includes online registration of voters and online application to be an absentee voter.

**e-Participation** - the use of ICT to open new channels for participation in the democratic process between elections. This comprises e-participation of citizens in:

- government’s policy process;
- the processes of policy-making, law-making and scrutiny by elected

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representatives;
• the processes of policy formulation in political parties; and other civil society organisations."

With the aim of intensifying the engagement of its citizens, the city council of Kalix in Sweden conducted an experiment in online deliberation. It enabled the citizens to have online discussions with local politicians and each other and to give their opinions on the renovation of the town centre. Over a two-week period citizens could participate through the Internet, as well as through traditional means of communication such as the telephone, post and fax. Most (86%) of those participating chose to use the Internet. The citizens were also able to vote on the issue online. To ensure that only those entitled to do so could vote and that they voted only once, the council set up a password-protected website and issued a password to registered voters. For citizens without a computer the council arranged for PCs to be made available at schools and libraries. Approximately 1,200 of the 15,000 inhabitants participated, 72% of whom reported the experience as a valuable democratic initiative.

In November 2001, the government of Queensland, Australia approved a comprehensive community engagement policy and e-democracy policy framework. The Queensland Government is committed to exploring the many new opportunities the Internet brings and to discovering ways in which this medium can strengthen participative democracy within Queensland. Their commitment, through a three-year e-democracy trial, to extend opportunities for community participation in the democratic process via the Internet, included measures 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.

An examination of their website shows an e-Democracy Unit established in the Office of the Premier. They have broadcasts of parliament online and an online petition system operational (launched August, 2002). An online community consultation trial was launched in November 2002 to develop a standard model, and these are expected to be running by mid-2003.

Stephen Coleman reported that ten online consultation experiments undertaken in the UK, which produced some positive results, also found that the public:

1) is interested in political issues that directly affect them;
2) wants to be heard but not necessarily take over the political process;
3) feels the political elite is difficult to reach; and

49 Ibid pp.18/19
51 <http://www.premiers.qld.gov.au/about/community/democracy.htm>
4) considers themselves “outside the equation”.

He argued that just because a government has implemented online service delivery does not mean this will automatically lead to greater democracy. There is definitely a potential for the new ICTs to invigorate democracy but only if harnessed to achieve a “two-way accountability”.

In the second part of its consultation paper the UK Government lays out seven criteria of online consultations, which form part of the Code of Practice on e-democracy developed by the Office of e-Envoy UK:

- Timing of consultation should be built into the planning process for a policy (including legislation) or service from the start, so that it has the best prospect of improving the proposals concerned, and so that sufficient time is left for it at each stage.

- It should be clear who is being consulted, about what questions, in what timescale and for what purpose.

- A consultation document should be as simple and concise as possible. It should make it as easy as possible for readers to respond, make contact or complain.

- Documents should be made widely available, with the fullest use of electronic means (though not to the exclusion of others), and should be effectively drawn to the attention of all interested groups and individuals.

- Sufficient time should be allowed for considered responses from all groups with an interest. Twelve weeks should be the standard minimum period for a consultation.

- Responses should be carefully and open-mindedly analysed, and the results made widely available, with an account of the views expressed, and reasons for decisions finally taken.

Departments should monitor and evaluate consultations, designating a consultation coordinator who will ensure the lessons are disseminated.

The 2002 study undertaken by the British organizations, Socitm (Society of Information Technology Management) and IdeA (The Improvement and Development Agency), discovered that e-democracy initiatives carried out in smaller, local jurisdictions were much more successful than in larger states. An excellent example is taking place in the town of Jesi in Italy, where the development of a civic network has created a democratic space for discussion and interaction between citizens and government, and where the

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53 <http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk> p.28
A high number of visits to the web site and of citizen participation to the open debate testifies to its success. 54

A second example, in the town of Grefsen-Kjelsås in Norway, demonstrated that although there is a high level of Internet usage and literacy, combined with an affluent, active and involved population, this does “not necessarily ensure swift take-up of e-democracy” nor result in a wave of democratic renewal. Their e-consultations exposed the limitations of this method, showing that the Internet will play only a partial role in the consultation process. 55

**ONLINE VOTING**

The British government has maintained, since the last General Election in June 2001, that one of their main goals is to bring youth into the democratic process. The paper sees e-Voting and e-Participation through the use of ICTs as means to engage this age group. In the UK general election of 2001, 60% of the total registered population voted, whereas only 40% of those between the ages of 18-24. Given the nature of the Internet and the age groupings of those who use it (80% of the age group 16-24, 70% of the age group 25-44) the government hoped that ICTs could be an application to bring the younger voters into the democratic process in order to improve representative democracy.

But participation overall was poorer than expected when online voting was tried in a number of electoral wards, in the May 2002 local elections across the UK. For example in Swindon, which mirrored most areas, only 10.8 percent of the voters chose to cast their votes via the Internet from home, local libraries and council-run information kiosks. 56

The 2002 Report nevertheless remains optimistic about the potential of online voting, although it recognizes there are other factors to be addressed as well.

A recent study commissioned by Elections Canada, and done by Jon Pammett and Lawrence Leduc, of those who did not vote in the 2000 Canadian federal election, produced even more surprising results. Qualifying the 960 non-voters into those who:

1) had access to a computer;
2) were “very or fairly likely” to vote via the Internet if this were possible; and
3) were “very or fairly interested” in the 2000 election, the survey found there would be only a potential rise of 2.82 % in the voting rate if Internet voting were implemented. 57

The United States federal government and many states, especially California and Arizona, are working towards developing methodologies to achieve online voting.

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55 Ibid. pg. 122
56 Ibid p.52
However, as the system of registration of voters is much different in the United States than in parliamentary democracies (the political parties register the voters not electoral commissions), online voting is seen as being further away from reality. 58

In the US presidential election 2000, the Federal Voter Assistance Program conducted a pilot of remote Internet voting among US military officers overseas. It used the Department of Defense’s public key infrastructure to provide authentication. The pilot raised many issues, not least how to increase the size of the system for a larger population and how to ensure the usability of the chosen security system. 59

Brazil, the world’s third largest democracy, has been using computer-based tabulation to monitor the integrity of their elections for a number of years. In the 1990 general election in the state of Santa Catarina, the Brazilian government first introduced the concept of electronic voting by having citizens cast their paper ballots and election workers entering the results into a computer system for tabulation. By 1996, after presenting identification at polling stations to verify eligibility, citizens used electronic voting kiosks to choose their candidates nationwide. By 1998, almost two-thirds of the voting population had cast electronic ballots in federal, state and local elections. (Holmes, 2001) While this is not strictly online voting, it does enable the results to be published more quickly and accurately, and serves to educate the public in the skills needed for future online voting.

Despite the fact that some governments are experimenting with online voting in the hope that more citizens will vote, it is inconclusive whether online voting will help to facilitate a greater civic participation in the electoral process, and indeed the Pammett/Leduc study suggests it will be minimal. There is no evidence as yet that the use of ICTs will rekindle involvement in representative democracy. What seems to be very much needed is a renewal of debate on the nature of democracy itself that will lead to a re-engagement of citizens in the political process. The use of ICTs would be but one small tool in this overall effort.

Responding to government-initiated consultations is the most common means of trying to influence policy. However, ICTs offer the possibility of much wider and varied forms of participation. For the purposes of the proposed e-participation policy the UK consultation paper sets out four main types of political activity and interaction:

1) Citizens and government.
2) Citizens and representatives.
3) Political parties.
4) Civic activity. 60

58 See <http://www.publicus.net>
59 A full evaluation report is available at <http://www.fvap.ncr.gov/voi.html>
60 Ibid pp.28/29
The UK paper recognizes that it is important to ensure that all sectors of society are brought into this new vision. It also addresses the issues of trust, privacy and security, three issues about which people have expressed anxiety when asked about their online activities. To this end it articulates very specific principles that need to be incorporated, and recognizes the importance of the inclusion of all, the building of trust, and the necessary policy issues to ensure that citizens will become engaged and that the goals of e-democracy will be achieved.  

CONCLUSION

Seeking to find an interactive role for the citizen in an effective and meaningful way is one of the major challenges now facing governments. There is a clear understanding that the new ICTS provide the opportunity and the means to engage the citizen. The major obstacle governments will have to solve in order to meet this new challenge will be to develop administrative means and a sufficient back office, consisting of resources, funding, and personnel, to achieve this. Another task will be the finding of ways and means to tabulate and assess the responses received from citizens. New ideas require creativity and innovation. The movement towards online consultations within government, with concomitant pressures from an increasingly interactive citizenry, will test the capacity of governments to change.

Providing the short answer to the question of what is the citizen’s role in the e-governance and e-democracy equation, Stephen Coleman, in his opening address to a recent conference, warned that citizens felt they were “outside the equation”. Ironically, it was Coleman who said in an online debate on new methods for democratic decision-making called, Boosting the Net Economy 2000: “All of this must be conducted by trusted bodies. Neither government nor commercial firms are sufficiently free of interests to enable them to build such trusted structures.”

As shown above, there are continuing gaps between different layers of society, depending on income and place in the society, of those who are online at home and at work and those who are not. The digital divide of cyberspace in developed countries is a serious issue that governments are grappling with. Together with the extent of the digital divide, voter malaise, disinterest, and the public’s cynicism about and distrust of their politicians and governments, it is uncertain whether the new ICTs, though they may have the potential to strengthen and perhaps reform already existing democratic institutions, will create any other environment that is not what we have come to see as ‘politics as usual.’

One of the key findings as outlined by Stephen Rosell in the 2000 report of a Canadian federal Roundtable on Renewing Governance, stressed the importance of dialogue and that it should not be confused with decision-making: “Dialogue precedes decision-

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61 Ibid p.21  <http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk>
“making…” and “Dialogue is needed, in particular, when people with different viewpoints, beliefs, problem-definitions, backgrounds, professions, interests, values or traditions must find common ground, must build a shared framework within which they can work together.”

His is a vision inclusive of a broad public contribution, and his work is liberally referred to in a recent Privy Council Office (Canada) report. Yet in actual practice, based on the re-characterization of e-governance as an elusive concept, and the exclusion of that broad public voice of different viewpoints, beliefs and backgrounds, from a seminal conference on the future of e-democracy in this country, that dialogue is in danger of taking place among the elites. Again, this is a fundamental issue, which has to be addressed by politicians and public administrators alike if e-democracy is to evolve and encompass the majority of our citizens.

If citizens are to be engaged online, the tools need to be provided, the issues broadcast widely, the facts made clear and stated in a palatable, understandable form, access to the means for input given to those who will be directly affected by the issues, a safe public space provided for an informed debate, and rational incentives for the ordinary citizen to enter into them. There is some evidence in several countries around the world, as shown in the examples above, that if the leaders and politicians make the effort, people will respond.

E-democracy is in its nascent state and while we cannot accurately predict what shape it will take in generations to come, we do know that there will be changes. The key to the success of e-democracy will be the participation and partnership of all the stakeholders in government and the citizenry alike.

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63 Stephen Rosell, Changing Frames: Leadership and Governance in the Information Age, Gilmore Printing, Ottawa, 2000. Pg. 27