

e-Democracy in Australia: the Challenge of Evolving a Successful Model

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Abstract: This paper examines the current status of e-democracy initiatives in Australia and considers the factors that might contribute to the evolution of a successful model of e-democracy in the Australian context. In particular, it examines whether any analogies can be drawn from the world of e-business which has transitioned from an over-hyped boom and then bust in the early years into a steadier and sustained growth in more recent times.

The paper concludes that, despite some valiant efforts by e-democracy enthusiasts, we have yet to hit on an e-democracy model that truly engages the Australian populace. Nevertheless, the analogy from e-business suggests that, given the right model(s) and the right environment, it can still be possible to deliver real benefits via e-democracy.

Keywords: e-democracy, e-business, model, Australia

1. Introduction

The eventual success of e-business initiatives and the corresponding move to online resources and applications in the e-government arena led many to have high hopes for similar online applications that would enhance democratic participation and decision making and "transform political cultures ...[and] institutions" (Robbin, Courtright et al. 2005 p41). To date, e-democracy initiatives in many countries have had mixed success (Flew and Young 2005 pg 1; Coleman and Norris 2005 p8) Certainly, in Australia, there have been no truly engaging initiatives that have achieved mass appeal such as the Amazon book site did in the early days of e-business and that EBay and various movie and music sites have done more recently.

Admittedly, since democratic focus and democratic processes are primarily national rather than global in nature and do not involve entertainment or commercial profit, we cannot expect quite the same sort of profile as the global e-business arena has achieved. Nevertheless, e-democracy in most countries has failed to live up to the expectations of many dedicated proponents. There is a "... paucity of convincing empirical evidence that ICTs have altered political life" (Robbin, Courtright et al. 2005 p417). This is certainly the case in Australia. It is instructive to consider why this might be. Is the concept itself flawed or have we just failed to find the right model(s)?

2. Australia's political environment

Australia is a federation comprising six states and two territories. The Australian political climate is fairly stable and largely conservative in its structure and processes (Chen, Gibson et al. 2006). There are three tiers of government: federal state/territory and local. At the federal level and in most state and territory jurisdictions, two major parties are dominant. The structure of the political system at the federal level and in most states means that it is rare for independents or representatives of minor parties to be elected to the single-member electorates in the lower houses, the key legislative bodies in Australian parliaments. At the federal level, the Senate (the upper house) operates as a house of review. Since it is elected by proportional representation from each of the states, minor parties have a better opportunity to get candidates elected to the Senate and they have, on occasion, held the balance of power between the two major parties, thus allowing them more clout in the decision-making process.

Australia has a representative democracy so citizens' influence on decision-making is indirect. One salient feature of Australian governments over the last few decades has been the increased tendency for policy to be decided at the executive level (Chen, Gibson et al. 2006). Thus many consider that, with the strong party discipline that prevails, parliament itself has been effectively reduced to a rubber stamp for executive decisions rather than a truly deliberative body.

Consequently, from the viewpoint of structure and practice, the Australian electoral system is not seamlessly responsive to evolving public opinion or to the desires of citizens keen to be more involved in decision-making. Those calling for policy review or input to policy development must rely on other, largely informal, mechanisms such as influencing politicians via lobby groups, trade unions or other citizen and organizational

groupings; promoting media campaigns or making submissions to the occasional parliamentary committee. Occasionally, in this globalized world, appeals might be made to supra national bodies such as the United Nations and international labour organisations.

Obviously, politicians have feedback on public sentiment via issues taken up by the media and via public polling by media outlets and other polling organisations. Additionally, the major political parties themselves work hard to monitor public opinion via their own private polling on potential vote-changing issues. Since Australian parliaments have relatively short terms (typically 3 years or less), the prospect of the next election is never far away. Recently, the current prime minister reversed his position on the issue of climate change ("not proven" to "will do something about it") presumably based on awareness that this proposition is now being taken seriously in the electorate.

3. Considering analogies from e-business

Despite the initial hype of e-business and the seemingly inevitable bust in 2001, the use of the Internet for commercial purposes has increased steadily and, in some cases, spectacularly. The development of e-democracy models may be informed by considering what factors, if any, affecting the success or otherwise of e-businesses may be pertinent to the development of e-democracy.

3.1 Environment

In the last few years, researchers in the world of e-business have identified some of the necessary pre-conditions and drivers that contribute to success in e-business (Chaffey 2006). These include appropriate communications infrastructure, government regulatory frameworks, the nature of the business model, readiness of the population to engage in the process (motivation, trust, ease of use, availability of tools, etc). Similar factors could influence the success of e-democracy initiatives.

3.2 Channels

One component of managing a successful e-business is being aware of the "channels" via which customers access your business. Businesses that kept both a store front and an online presence had to consider whether this would increase sales or whether one business outlet would cannibalize the other. For participation in a democratic sense, this is not a critical issue, since more points of access to government and policy decision makers means greater flexibility for the citizen to choose their preferred method. From a political activist point of view, it may make sense for citizens to use a variety of access channels. Brett Solomon, the executive director of the activist site getup.org.au, considers that a successful activist campaign often involves a blend of different strategies possibly including both traditional tactics (eg street marches) and online facilitation (Solomon in Barclay 2006).

From the point of increasing citizen engagement, access channels can be an issue. Several researchers have noted that providing participatory and consultation facilities on government web sites mean relying on politicians and administrators to approve and administer these initiatives. At the present time, as Dowe notes "Government administrators and politicians are not interested in using the new ideas put forth as it supposedly means more work and less power" (Dowe cited in Coleman and Norris 2005 p15).

A survey by Kim and Holzer (2006) of bureaucrats in South Korea confirmed that many public administrators do have negative attitudes to citizen engagement in the policy making process. Many officials doubt the capacity of citizens to make such decisions. In fact, some members of the public may have particular expertise in certain areas and be better informed than bureaucrats and also politicians who necessarily have to cover a wide area of expertise (Kim and Holzer 2006). A legitimate criticism by South Korean bureaucrats is that forums may be dominated by narrow interests or be reduced to abuse and haranguing of other forum members. Similar reluctance and doubt has been noted by other researchers (Gualtieri cited in Geiselhart, Griffiths et al. 2003). The availability of ICT tools will not automatically engender in the citizenry the motivation and ability to process potentially complex information with an open mind. If the aim of e-democracy is to widen the range of democratic participants, then models will need to be designed carefully to encourage the desired result.

3.3 Disruptive technology

While the Internet has spurred the creation of new online businesses, it has also undermined the viability of some traditional businesses. Amazon was probably the first high profile online business that literally

threatened even well established bookstore chains. Currently newspapers are experiencing an eroding of their revenue base, especially those that rely on classified advertising, a field which is inexorably moving online.

Both Thompson and Crabtree (King 2006; Crabtree 2002) warn that the Internet may be similarly disruptive for democracy. It allows citizens to be removed from their geographical ties; to easily filter views so that they only interact with like-minded people, possibly reinforcing extremist views; to have undue clout via small interest groups perhaps lacking a coherent agenda; to expect direct links to political power and correspondingly quick replies. "In this sense, the Internet could be disruptive to the ideal of a public political space. The stable basis of participatory democracy, the need for something in common to help overcome the things on which we disagree, could be gradually eroded. Politics, the process of getting over these disagreements, could be undermined" (Crabtree 2002 p2).

3.4 Resources

In the early days of online commerce, a business could be sustained with a fairly simple website. For serious online businesses these days, maintaining a sophisticated website and the associated applications and infrastructure, is a significant cost. Customer expectations for functionality, appealing presentation, ease of use and the assurance of privacy have risen.

Citizen expectations for e-democracy participatory services are presumably similar. While many government sectors might be considered to have deep pockets and the appropriate technical expertise, the question arises of justifying the expenditure of public monies on e-democracy projects. The returns from projects designed to increase public engagement are likely to be largely qualitative.

Conversely, where e-democracy sites are setup and maintained by community interest groups or other non-government organisations, they are likely to be subject to pressures such as financial stress and maintaining the enthusiasm of volunteer staff. "E-democracy projects involve more than set-up costs; it has often proved difficult to maintain them as permanent democratic features" (Coleman and Norris 2005 p18).

The rise of e-business saw new players flood into the online market. Despite some spectacular successes, many online businesses were not sustainable. Over time, the well-established and well-resourced traditional companies have been able to re-establish their position in many market segments eg News Corporation's purchase of the social networking site MySpace.com (BBC, 2005). Some e-democracy pessimists suggest that a similar situation may result from e-democracy initiatives. Rather than bring new players into the game, it may serve to entrench the access of the traditional political players, the so-called elites, lobby groups and major political parties (Norris and Curtice 2006).

3.5 Disintermediation

Early e-business analysts emphasized the likely role of the Internet in disintermediation, cutting out the middleman or agent thus allowing customers to trade directly with product producers. This certainly eventuated in some areas (Chaffey 2006). For example, many low-cost airlines have succeeded in moving most of their customers to direct online bookings, negating the need for travel agents. Traditional airlines have followed suit by setting up their own online booking systems and eventually removing special pricing deals for travel agents.

While disintermediation has occurred in some instances, it has coincided with reintermediation. A whole new group of e-business intermediaries has arisen and proved effective in assisting online consumers to more efficiently perform desired functions eg sites which aggregate available accommodation or find the best deal on a particular product, online stock trading sites, sites for accessing music, search engines, etc.

From the e-democracy point of view, political intermediaries have also arisen in the online world. This is particularly obvious in the activist area where organisations such as moveon.org use ICTs to rouse citizens, develop electronic petitions and help elect candidates who support their ideals. In Australia, sites such as getup.org perform an analogous function.

In the area of e-democracy participation, forums run independently of government perform a similar role replacing, to some extent, the traditional town meeting. E-democracy models therefore should not just model the direct relationship between citizens and government. As Gronlund notes, "... intermediaries of different kinds have begun to interfere in those relations. This includes both service intermediaries ...and 'democracy

consultants' " (Gronlund 2002 p1). He cites, for example, the democratic consultation performed in the town of Kalix in Sweden 2001 which was implemented by a private consultant company Votia Empowerment.

Correspondingly, Caddy sees an enhanced role for intermediaries, such as the BBC, who are trusted, branded and separate from government. " ... citizens will look to them for packaging and facilitating the access to information" (in Coleman and Norris 2005 p30).

Table 1: Factors influencing the success of e-business or e-democracy

Factors	E-business	E-democracy
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for appropriate infrastructure • Supporting regulatory framework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for appropriate infrastructure
Access channels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Careful management needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variety of access channels is a plus
Citizen engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear motivation – satisfying desires (social, financial, etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation less compelling – citizen reluctance • Prospect of domination by narrow interest groups
Disruptive technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New businesses created • Some existing businesses undermined 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could undermine existing political power structures • May lead to expectations that can't be met (eg direct access to politicians)
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sophisticated sites require significant resources • Well-resourced companies re-establishing their position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources needed but return largely qualitative • Need to maintain enthusiasm of volunteer community groups • May reinforce position of elites
Disintermediation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occurred in some areas (eg airlines) but new middlemen have arisen (eg sites for finding accommodation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent forums; sites to co-ordinate and motivate political activism • Democracy consultants; trusted brands

4. The nature of democracy and e-democracy

There is no definitive definition of the concept of democracy, however the "... basic principles of freedom and direct involvement in one's own self government .." are key (King 2006 p16).

The implementation of democracy varies from country to country. Researchers generally distinguish between broad categories of democracy. Gronlund (2003), for example identifies 'quick', 'strong' and 'thin' democracy. In 'quick,' or direct democracy, the citizen makes decisions by responding to opinion polls and representatives are bound by those decisions. An example is the Citizen Initiated Referenda in the Californian context.

Thin, or representative, democracy means the citizen's role is as a voter and the representative, once elected, is given an open mandate for decision-making. As Bishop notes, representative democracy "is often disparaged as not 'true' democracy" and considered to distance citizens from their political representatives and the decision-making process (2002 p39). In contrast, strong or deliberative democracy, entails the citizen being included in open debate and the representative, after election, continuing to interact with the citizen about decisions.

The primary drivers for e-democracy initiatives globally have been both the prospect of taking advantage of the opportunities provided by technical developments in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and the perceived need to raise the level of citizen participation in the democratic process, particularly as evidenced by factors such as declining voter turnout at elections in many democratic countries (Gronlund 2003). Proponents of a more direct or deliberative and participatory model of democracy therefore see ICTs as an opportunity for this 'truer' form of democracy that will "reinvigorate involvement in the public sphere" (King 2006 p18). Taking a broad view of this reinvigoration, e-democracy includes the use of ICTs not only by governments at all levels but also actors such as political parties, the media, citizen groups and lobby groups (Clift in King 2006).

5. Developing e-democracy models

Democracy and decision-making are multi-dimensional, so there are a variety of approaches that may help identify a role for e-democracy initiatives. The nature of the democracy is one factor that impacts on the role of ICTs in the models of e-democracy developed (Norris and Curtice 2006).

Democratic governments typically follow a decision-making cycle consisting of agenda setting and analysis followed by creating, implementing and monitoring the policy (Macintosh 2004; Gronlund 2003). These stages are relevant for e-democracy models since, as Gronlund discusses (2003), the extent of the role for public participation depends on both the broad category of democracy (eg thin, strong) and the stage of the decision-making process. In the case of strong democracy, citizens could be involved in all stages whereas, in thin democracy, their involvement is likely to be confined to the policy creation stage and possibly, the policy monitoring stage.

King (2006 p28) presents a different categorisation for identifying aspects of democracy which may be addressed by e-democracy.

- Anticipatory democracy: informed guiding of future decisions
- Deliberative democracy: debating and analysing potential policy
- Grassroots democracy: emphasizing small local initiatives
- Participatory democracy: consensus decision-making and resolving disagreement
- World democracy: informing world-wide movements.

Some authors characterize e-democracy as a more mature stage of e-government. Riley (cited in Shackleton, Fisher et al. 2004 p3), for example, identifies three stages of e-government maturity: e-government, e-governance and e-democracy. Shackleton and others, however, counter that e-democracy is not simply a progression from earlier stages of e-government and that the stages, and therefore models, may vary in different levels of government (Shackleton, Fisher et al. 2004). Additionally, e-democracy, using the broad definition, is not the sole prerogative of government since other outside actors are involved.

Several researchers have highlighted the multi-dimensional nature of e-democracy in the wider context of society. Parvez (2006) for example, identifies the technological, institutional and agency dimensions that impinge on implementations of e-democracy. The technological dimension includes factors such as access to information resources and the ability to participate in online discussions. The organisational dimension includes factors such as policies and procedures, available resources and institutional attitudes. The agency dimension includes factors such as the nature of e-democracy participants and the difficulties they encounter and attitudes of individuals (eg citizens, politicians).

Building on the structuration theory of Giddens and earlier work by Orlikowski, Parvez (2006), has developed a comprehensive framework which provides an approach for explicitly recognizing and examining this multidimensionality of e-democracy and the interaction between these dimensions. His double-structuration loop (Parvez 2006 pg336) acknowledges the dual roles of technology-shaping processes and technology-use processes and how human actors interact with these. The inner loop, technology-shaping processes, examines "how technological infrastructures that support e-democracy projects evolve and are shaped in an ongoing process by human actors". The outer loop, technology-use processes, examines "how human actors interact with technological infrastructure to enact e-democracy practices and engage in the democratic process". See Figure 1.

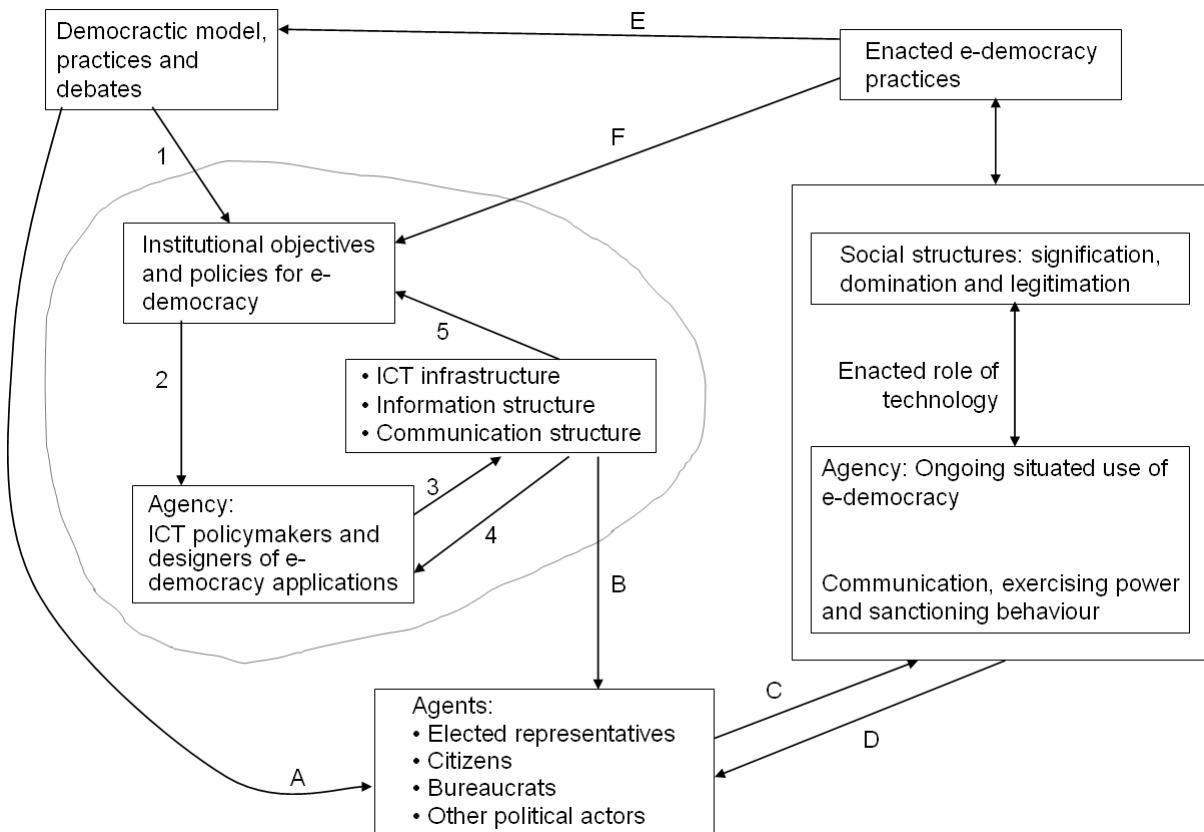


Figure 1: Structurational framework for examining e-democracy (Parvez 2006). (Redrawn for clarity)

This framework provides a useful approach for reflecting on the different aspects of e-democracy. It recognizes the enablement and constraints that social and political actors encounter interacting with the technological and political environment.

6. The Australian perspective for e-democracy

6.1 e-Government progress

Over the last several years, Australia, like many other countries, has implemented a variety of systems, at both state and federal level, to provide government information and transactional services online. These online government services have matured so that Australia was ranked 6th in the United Nations E-Government Readiness Index of 2005 (UNPAN 2005). The Australian Government Online Directory (GOLD) was noted as an example of a best practice portal for finding government information online.

E-democracy however, requires more than just information and service delivery. It requires facilities whereby the citizenry can be more involved in the actual decision-making process, through consultation and the ability to discuss and deliberate on government policy proposals.

6.2 Infrastructure

In terms of access, Australia has been relatively slow in improving Internet infrastructure and the price has remained relatively high, especially when compared with other developed countries. This is particularly the case in the lower-density rural and remote areas (King 2006). It is only recently that the proportion of broadband users has surpassed the proportion of dial-up users online (OECD 2006). While this does not directly impinge on participation, a faster and possibly "always on" connection certainly makes such participation easier. The technological base of e-democracy needs to ensure that we allow equality of access; ease of use; ability to process the information provided so that we do not deepen the digital divide that is already evident (King 2006).

6.3 Disengaged citizenry

In the Australian context, voter turnout, as such, is not indicative of citizen apathy since voting in elections is compulsory at both the state and federal level. Nevertheless, claims of political disengagement among the populace have been widespread in academic, media and journalistic circles (Goot 2002; King 2006). Such claims typically cite characteristics such as increased distrust of both politicians and the political process, falling membership of political parties and trade unions and young people not registering for the electoral roll. According to the political scientist Jaensch "... the 'main component' of Australian political culture has long been 'a combination of apathy towards politics, and a scepticism, even a cynicism, towards its institutions and political actors' " (cited in Goot 2002).

Goot (2002) himself disputes the extent to which this is a new phenomenon and provides some evidence that citizen engagement has varied over time depending on the political circumstances. Nevertheless, he does find that the attachment to political parties has waned and that voters are increasingly cynical about election promises and doubtful of the honesty and ethical character of politicians. Thus, in Australia as elsewhere in the democratic world, there is still the need to encourage an informed and engaged citizenry if, as claimed by many, this is required to reinforce the legitimacy of government and ensure a vibrant democracy (Bishop 2002 p41) .

6.4 Current assessment

The democratic Audit of Australia assesses Australia's position as a democracy using questions from IDEA (the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance). The recent review (Chen, Gibson et al. 2006) focused particularly on the role of ICTs in the Australian democratic process and in citizen participation. The audit findings indicate that political parties and governments have been slow to take up opportunities to augment citizens' participation. These findings lend support to the view that technologies, of themselves, are not sufficient to promote enhanced opportunities for political engagement. The general conservatism of the Australian political structure and culture also plays a part.

In the audit, ICTs are seen to have had both positive and negative effects. There have been some initiatives designed to open up democratic practices. For example, the researchers (Chen, Gibson et al. 2006) identify:

- innovations by political parties, especially minor parties, that serve to improve the visibility of their operations
- new technologies being made more generally available and accessible
- online applications that permit citizens to critique policy development.

Correspondingly, some changes have served to constrain democratic processes:

- ICTs being increasingly used for surveillance of citizens and their actions
- ongoing lack of appropriate resources at the grassroots level
- downplaying the value of direct interaction between citizen and government
- lack of interest in the general community in taking advantage of those opportunities that are available.

The main political parties in Australia have all had established web sites for ten or more years. As discussed in the democratic audit (Chen, Gibson et al. 2006), these sites are still used primarily for information provision, rather than engagement, and the target audience seems essentially confined to party members and a limited number of the political elite. Additionally, the limited use of these sites by members of the public means that party interest has waned. Smaller parties are having some success with the greater reach a web presence allows them.

The United Nations E-participation Readiness Index ranks Australia 9th with the comment that "... formal consultation facilitation has previously been Australia's deficit [but] its inclusion on ministry sites now indicates a strengthening of participatory initiatives" (UNPAN 2005 p63). However this facility is quite minimal and, in many cases, perfunctory. The initiatives that do occur on government sites are often smaller low-level projects targeted at specific disadvantaged groups and thus shielded from political flak (Chen, Gibson et al. 2006).

In terms of politicians' personal websites, the major parties are imposing tighter constraints to ensure that they follow the party line. Quite recently, one federal member (a leader of the Opposition at the time) allowed

members of his electorate to vote online on various propositions put forward on his personal website. However, this facility was quickly removed when the voting ran counter to party policy (Chen, Gibson et al. 2006).

Most state governments have developed community websites but these are not aimed at encouraging participation. Sites such as CommunityBuilders in New South Wales provide information, news about local issues and the ability to contact bureaucrats. The state of Queensland has made the most high profile effort with their GetInvolved site that includes online discussions on selected topics and the ability to send e-petitions to parliament (Chen, Gibson et al. 2006).

Different tiers of government obviously have different responsibilities and consequently different relationships with citizens. "National governments, responsible for the welfare of a whole country, are unlikely to understand the needs of communities in the same way as local government" (Shackleton, Fisher et al. 2004 p9). Therefore many e-democracy researchers see the local government level as the most natural place for government to engage with citizenry (Gronlund 2002; Philipsborn in Coleman and Norris 2005). This is less likely to be the case in the Australian scene since local governments lack real political power and are chronically under-funded being reliant on state government funding for non-routine projects. Not unnaturally, those online initiatives that are promoted tend to concentrate on e-government service delivery, primarily as a means of reducing costs or basic information provision eg minutes of council meetings (Shackleton, Fisher et al. 2004). There are some exceptions, such as Darebin City Council's consultation forums (Bailey, 2006).

The major political parties do make use of ICTs behind the scenes. They maintain comprehensive databases of voters along with relevant personal information such as contacts they have had with their member of parliament, issues of interest, etc. These allow the local member to use mass mail outs to tailor political messages to particular segments of his/her electorate. The lesser resources of the minor parties means that they cannot compete on the same level. The ability to use ICTs to closely monitor an electorate can be a big advantage in the Australian system, where a relatively few marginal electorates often decide the government.

Many citizen groups and non-government organizations have established websites. These are typically largely static sites providing information and group news. The Australian government has not been proactive in supporting such organizations in their online efforts. Some of the larger organizations are, however, starting to translate their online social capital into political influence. The Australian Council of Social Service, for example, enables site users to send personalised email to appropriate parliamentarians (Chen, Gibson et al. 2006). A variety of social commentary or activist sites have arisen. Some of these are transient, being devoted to single issues or particular election campaign issues. The Wilderness Society, for example, had a site for the 2004 election.

The successful sites illustrate that it is possible to engage citizens online and counteract, to some extent, the concentration of Australian media in the hands of a few large organisations. The e-journal On Line Opinion provides a forum for the discussion of social and political issues. It is run by a non-profit organisation and works with other organisations (universities, NGOs, trade unions, etc) to provide research into pertinent issues. It is achieving some prominence having made submissions to a recent government health enquiry and subsequently realized visibility with the mainstream media (Chen, Gibson et al. 2006).

The activist site getup.org.au is broadly modelled on the successful moveon.org. Getup has discussions on selected topics. It sends out email to members periodically alerting them that certain decisions are about to be made on particular issues, so that appropriate politicians can be contacted. Brett Solomon of getup, claims some success for one of their recent campaigns when an unpopular bill relating to refugees was withdrawn by the government shortly before a vote was due (Barclay 2006).

Recently, as Australia approaches a federal election (likely to be held before the end of 2007), the role of the Internet and particularly the social networking sites have achieved some celebrity. The Prime Minister's first foray into online video, via YouTube, was to launch his government's policy on climate change. The launch video was widely covered in the traditional media although it was also criticized for being too static and quickly became the subject of spam, abuse and comedic routines (Age, 2007). As has been found elsewhere in the world, this emphasizes the difficulties such technologies produce for politicians in "controlling the message".

Social networking sites enable political actors to have a more intimate relationship with constituents. Along with a specific campaign website, the Australian Leader of the Opposition, like many politicians overseas, has a profile on the sites MySpace and Facebook. How effective this will be, in terms of actual votes at election time rather than just novelty value, remains to be seen. Coleman (ABC, 2007b) suggests "most of what politicians do on the Internet is almost totally ignored". Perhaps, more targeted initiatives are effective. The Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition recently took part in a webcast specifically directed at, and restricted to, Christians watching in 700 churches around the country (ABC, 2007a). In an era where the concept of market segments applies also to politics, this initiative attracted an estimated audience of 100,000 people and thus enabled the politicians to more precisely target the Christian lobby.

7. Conclusion

If analogies from e-business and other technological advances are relevant, then it seems that ICTs will impact on democratic processes in Australia whether we wish it or not. ICTs have infiltrated our society and they will have impacts on democracy as in other areas, either dramatic or subtle. The challenge is to learn what lessons we can and ensure that the models developed actually serve to enhance democracy rather than detract from it.

E-democracy is not necessarily a threat to representative democracy. There is plenty of scope to augment the citizen's relationship with government within existing structures. As Crabtree (2003) emphasizes "The political potential of the internet lies not in connecting people to politicians, still less in online voting; it lies in the possibility of bringing citizens together to help themselves".

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