Singing from the Same Hymnsheet? The Impact of Internal Stakeholders on the Development of e-Democracy

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Abstract: Early interest in e-government focused on technological convergence, system interoperability and data sharing. After a slow start, there are signs that provision is improving; 2006 figures show that across Europe 67.8% of basic G2B services and 36.8% of basic G2C public services are fully developed. As provision has improved, e-government ontologies have broadened, moving beyond information provision and service delivery to embrace facets of governance such as transparency, dialogue, shared decision-making, collaborative policy-formulation and partnership. Active citizenship has long been recognised as a key component of a healthy, functioning democracy and the both the European Commission and individual European nations are keen to exploit the networking opportunities presented by the Web to engage more closely with their citizens. Despite somewhat lofty ambitions, the European Commission itself has recently acknowledged that the Web is not yet operating as an effective facilitator of democratic inputs into policymaking, let alone the more ambitious mandates. The empirical research reported in this paper explores the reasons why. Our paper presents the findings of a study of the extent to which internal stakeholders of a local government authority (Borough Council) in the UK share a sense of purpose in developing an e-government portal as a vehicle for e-democracy. It addresses whether lack of progress is related to a mismatch between theorised and actual stakeholder motivations, preferences and behaviours. As well as the officials tasked to bring to fruition the concept of online services and e-democracy, politicians have a key role to play in promoting e-government development. Accordingly, two main groups of stakeholders are in focus; elected Councillors and Borough Council employees (or 'officers'). It explores whether the political decision makers and those responsible for online delivery share a common sense of purpose and understanding of the potential value of Web-enabled participation both for the local authority and citizens. Finally, it evaluates whether a lack of shared vision may be hindering progress towards e-democracy. The findings expose a number of pertinent and long-standing issues and challenges. In general there is a lack of shared purpose and motivation and a view that the added value of Web-enabled participation may be theoretical rather than real. As such, the study is of interest not only to academic colleagues, but also to policy-makers and local authorities tasked with delivering public services online and engaging citizens more extensively in the processes of democracy.

Keywords: e-democracy, e-participation, engagement, UK, local e-government, internal stakeholders

1. Introduction

Early interest in e-government focused on technological convergence, inter-operability and data sharing. Recent reports indicate that European nations are making good progress in these areas (EC, 2007) with the European Commission stating, 'eGovernment-based services are becoming more effective nationally and more interoperable at European level. At the same time we are delivering higher quality, saving billions of euros through efficiency gains, and increasing transparency and accountability of our administrations' (2007). 67.8% of basic G2B services and 36.8% of basic G2C public services are now fully online (EC, 2007), offering potential benefits for the economic competitiveness of European nations. In the foreword to the most recent progress report, the European Commissioner in charge of Information Society and Media stated, 'eGovernment-based services act as a benchmark for a competitive economy. Countries that score high on public-sector openness, efficiency and e-government delivery also top economic performance and competitiveness scoreboards, according to the World Economic Forum and measurements made by other international bodies.' This statement indicates the importance assigned to e-government by the European Commission in terms of its fundamental centrality to national economic well-being.

As e-government provision improves and measurable benefits accrue to member states in terms of cost savings, efficiency, delivery quality and accessibility, the European agenda is moving beyond simply providing public services online to ambitions of a wired-up continent in which citizens and policy-makers engage to enhance democratic decision-making. E-government strategy and policy has broadened to embrace facilitative technological discourses of process and relationship re-engineering. The 'i2010 eGovernment Action Plan' (April 2006) includes explicit e-democracy and e-participation objectives in which citizens become active participants in political decision-making and

policy formulation. But in its review of e-government progress towards i2010 objectives, the European Commission notes that the Web is not yet operating as an effective facilitator of democratic inputs into policymaking (EC, 2007). In a robustly-worded analysis the report highlights a propensity for decision-makers to focus on technical and economic efficiency rather than deliberative strategies (EC, 2007). From a provider perspective the technological challenges are easier to face than the socio-political; they are less complex, easier to define, understand and communicate and potentially less controversial. Fewer people are involved offering the prospect of fewer conflicting objectives and less dissent; outcomes are more measurable and value for money relatively easy to demonstrate. Against this background, this paper queries whether lack of progress on e-democracy is related to divergent priorities amongst internal stakeholders making it difficult to achieve a shared sense of purpose. In exploring this the paper presents the findings of research into the extent to which elected councillors and officers of a local government authority in the UK share a sense of purpose in developing their e-government portal as a vehicle for e-democracy.

2. Background: The problem under investigation

The 'i2010 eGovernment Action Plan', agreed by all member states and published in April 2006 (EC, 2006) contains five key objectives: i) no citizen left behind, ii) making efficiency and effectiveness a reality, iii) implementing high impact key services for citizens and businesses, iv) putting key enablers in place to assure convenient, secure, interoperable services, and v) strengthening participation and democratic decision-making. Whilst i – iv have long been key components of the European e-government vision, the fifth objective denotes a broadening of ambition, role and purpose. The specific e-democracy objective is to achieve, by 2010, tools for effective public debate and participation in democratic decision-making (EC, 2006). The purpose is to enhance decision-making and to involve citizens more extensively in democracy in order to promote societal cohesion (EC 2006:10). This signifies a change in focus away from service delivery to governance, by which we mean 'the use of information and communication technology to improve the quality and efficiency of all phases of the life cycle of legislation' (Gordon, 2004). To this end member states are asked to test ICT tools that facilitate transparency and public involvement in democratic decision-making (EC 2006:11). The approach is supply-led and necessitates shared vision and commitment amongst those responsible for delivering e-government, including elected representatives, executive civil servants, web managers, administrators and content providers.

Earlier studies suggest that both elected representatives may need some re-educating; a UK-based study suggests that the majority of citizens feel 'disconnected' from political life (Coleman, 2005). Of those surveyed, 94% of those with no contact with their representative felt disconnected, compared to 61% overall. The study indicates a relationship between contact and citizens' feelings of being connected (or not) to their elected representative, and political life. Whilst the web may have reduced the physical distance between the two groups, there is some evidence that politicians are uncomfortable in this newly mediated space (Coleman, 2005). Ekelin (2006) identifies an unwillingness by politicians and civil servants to take active part in electronic dialogue with citizens; difficulties emerging from a lack of strategy concerning how to deal with 'informal', e-enabled citizen input into 'formal' decision-making, and broader issues of appropriateness and legitimacy. A study of UK parliamentarians (Ward and Lusoli, 2005) found that most were using personal websites to 'modernise' established communication methods, rather than reinvigorating relations with constituents by employing web-based technology in new, interactive ways. In a recent study, Ward et al (2007) argue that an elected representative's use of the web for citizen engagement is affected by various factors; some personal, some organisational and some political, such that practice varies widely. Citizens, for their part, may also need to be re-educated. Colman (2004) suggests that politicians and citizens need to acquire new types of communication skills and modes if web-based dialogue is to be successful. In a recent paper, we suggest that although citizens perceive moderate value in online service delivery, they see little value in using the web for democratic engagement (Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley, 2006).

Notwithstanding difficulties in making web-enabled representation a reality, across Europe various models of citizen engagement are being tested. Networking technologies have been identified as particularly useful for citizen engagement, including file-sharing, email, websites, navigating, chatting, message targeting and video-conferencing, including networking technologies (Snellen, 2002). In recent years state-sponsored e-governance activities have proliferated; in Holland citizens were invited to input directly on town redevelopment proposals (Moody, 2007); in Germany citizens debated traffic proposals via a discussion forum (Roeder et al, 2005); in Italy e-voting has been

trialled in provincial elections (Villafiorita and Fasanelli, 2006); Denmark and Estonia have also trialled e-voting (Biasiotti and Nannucci, 2004); in Scotland young people engage in debate and voting in a local youth parliament (Smith et al, 2006) and use engage in regional e-community council toolkits (Macintosh et al, 2004).

Despite these, and many other interesting e-participation experiments, it would be premature to conclude that e-governance has come of age. In the Dutch project, plans to have people vote for policy proposals failed even before they reached the city council in case they supported plans the city would not like to see realised (Moody, 2007); the German experience saw citizens expressing a wish for fast realisation of their proposals during the future planning process (Roeder et al, 2005). Generic problems of access, exclusion, and the maverick citizen remain unsolved. Psychological barriers to engagement also need to be addressed. In Ekelin's Swedish study, 'politicans and municipal officers …were more concerned with what the other parts were doing or not doing, than seeing the possibility of e-participation as a way to motivate each other in learning by participation (2006:117). These ongoing concerns are reflected in the European Commission Status Report on eGovernment (2007) in which it is observed, 'at this stage, it is not certain that ICT encourages and assists citizens to participate and facilitate engagement' (2007:10). The problem seems to be that, 'there is a danger that ICT in the democratic process encourages populist participation, whereas it should instead ensure mature engagement and well-informed debate' (2007a:10). Challenges are two-fold: to improve participation rates and to moderate debate such that it becomes truly facilitative and participative. The EC Status Report identifies the following as key to improving participation: transparency; supporting political activity and improving consultation; building democratic knowledge by enhancing deliberative space; and bridging social and political inequalities (EC 2007:71). The report identifies a need for process design and discourse rules, including 'how deliberation is moderated, the space for dissent, how it is managed and the impact of deliberations upon decisions and on stakeholders' perceptions and behaviour' (EC 2007:10). This research seeks to ascertain the extent to which process design and discourse rules are developed and pursued in common by those responsible for engaging citizens in democratic decision-making – referred to as 'stakeholders' in this study.

For the purposes of the qualitative research reported in this paper the term 'stakeholder' ia defined somewhat narrowly in that it is limited to those involved in developing and operating e-government in a local borough council in South-East England. The notion of a stakeholder refers to those with a direct interest in actions or decisions of an organisation or enterprise. In this paper we employ the term to apply to two distinct groups of people. The first group comprises local councillors who in the English system of local government are politicians elected to serve as executive decision-makers in the local borough council for a limited term. The second group comprises employees (or 'officers') of the local borough council who are civil servants working in functional departments with specific responsibility for developing the technological and operational functionality and content of e-government.In exploring convergence or divergence of views (whether stakeholders are 'singing from the same hymnsheet') the following research questions are posed:

- Do elected councillors and borough council officers share a common view of the purpose of the e-government website?

- Do they share a common view of the prospects for electronically-enabled, participatory governance?

- Finally, do they share a view of barriers to e-enabled participation and how might these be overcome?

3. Method

The study reported in this paper employs a qualitative methodology, specifically a series of interviews with local elected councillors and borough council officers to draw out the key issues of importance to each, the design is ex post facto, where the researcher simply observes and measures the situation as found. There is no attempt to manipulate or experiment, thus the study is designed simply to be a "snapshot" of the current state of affairs. The data analysis sought to expose themes; based upon experience content analysis software was not employed as it was considered more effective to trawl through the transcripts manually, identifying emergent themes, coding, reflecting, revisiting earlier codings; in essence employing a process of saturation (Herbert and Higgs, 2004). For our purposes saturation is defined as enabling the identification of phenomena, themes and issues which emerge from the various stages of data collection and which are *either* anchored in the literature *or* indeed,

seem to be emergent and not previously identified in the literature. The saturation phase is particularly crucial in the analysis of the qualitative data, informing the production of constructs and items for inclusion in a quantitative instrument. In Haig's (2005) analysis, we must take care to distinguish phenomena from data, the former being relatively stable, recurrent general features of the work that we seek to explain, whilst data are essentially idiosyncratic to particular investigative contexts.

The study was conducted in a borough in the county of Surrey, UK; selected because it is a relatively prosperous part of the country with computer ownership and Web access above the national average. The research population is divided into two distinct categories: providers and users. The category 'providers' is divided into two distinct sub-categories: i) elected councillors and ii) borough council officers involved with Web provision. 'Users' is defined as citizens living in the borough. The sampling frame of the provider group comprises key stakeholders involved in providing e-government to citizens, identified by the Web Manager employed by the borough council. With the Web Manager's input, the sub-category 'borough council officers' was again divided into two distinct sub-categories: i) executive decision-makers, with responsibility for strategic planning and delivery of G2C; and ii) web administrators, with responsibility for updating the content of departmental webpages. All individuals in the sampling frame were contacted; with the exception of two key stakeholders (unavailable for time reasons), all others in the sampling frame were interviewed. Employing semi-structured interviewing techniques, the views, opinions, expectations and perspectives of a total of 10 key stakeholders were elicited on the purpose, objectives, role, state of development, progress, content, and prospects of the borough council website for two distinct purposes; eGovernment: delivery of services and eGovernance: engaging citizens in dialogue and decision-making. The interview schedule was divided into two: Part A, concerned with eGovernment, and Part B, concerned with eGovernance. Part A contained questions in five distinct categories: Objectives, Usage, Value, Integration (joined-up services) and Non-users; Part B contained four: Current Use, Objectives, Engagement and Prospects. Each section comprised a series of short, open-ended questions designed to allow participants maximum freedom to express their views. A classic canonical didactic format was employed, in which the interviewer simply posed a series of questions. The intention of the interviews was to elicit information, views and opinions and since the participants all had knowledge and experience of the e-government website, there was little need for much interviewer intervention in the form of supplementary information or direction. Questions were simple and open-ended, for example: Part A, Objectives: i) What is the overall objective of the website? ii) Who is it for? iii) What do you want them to do with it? The main role of the interviewer was to ensure that participants were at ease, that each contribution fitted logically with what went before, that the salient issues emerging from the literature were addressed, and that the sessions ran smoothly.

4. Findings

This section contains the findings from the qualitative data, considering each of the research questions in turn. In presenting a summary of participants' views the responses are grouped according to the categories defined above: executive decision-makers, web administrators, and elected councillors.

4.1 Research question I: Do elected councillors and borough council officers share a common view of the purpose of the e-government website?

The executive decision-makers view the purpose of the website in terms of information provision, service delivery and efficiency savings. They mentioned specifically: improved access to useful, relevant information, enabling transactions, making efficiency savings, providing better services, improving service delivery, enabling the public to self-serve and thus relieving staff of telephone or face to face queries. Efficiency was a key theme; one of this group commented, 'Queries…actually go to the right person just saving time and making us look like a slick kind of organisation.' Only one of this group suggested that it might have a role to play in encouraging two-way dialogue between the Council and its citizens. The views of the web administrators overlapped some of these points. This group mentioned specifically: a means of signposting services, providing information, enabling easy access to services and relieving staff of dealing with face to face or telephone enquiries; 'People can find things on the website without having to come in so it's a lot easier for people, so it's quite a good resource really'. In contrast to the executive group, none of the web administrators specifically identify service improvement as a purpose of the website. In contrast to both groups of civil servants, the elected representatives generally have a broader view. They regard the purpose of the website as: information provision, enabling communication, encouraging consultation with citizens and enabling

them to become better informed and more involved in local decisions. Economy and efficiency are important, 'It's providing information in a more modern and convenient fashion instead of just huge amounts of hard copy information. It's an improvement both from a customer services point of view and it means we spend less time and money on producing things on paper.' One councillor described the website as a way of enabling 'the public to find out what the Council is up to.'In sum, there is a broad consensus around the themes of information provision and efficiency. The two groups of council officers; executive decision-makers and web administrators, broadly share similar views that may be described as 'inside-out'. Elected councillors seem to have a broader, more balanced 'inside-out'/'outside-in' perspective; the web enables greater citizen consultation and involvement and makes the Council more transparent. In relation to the first research question, we can conclude that opinions converge around information provision and efficiency, but diverge around organisational openness, citizen consultation and involvement.

4.2 Research question II: Do elected councillors and borough council officers share a common view of the prospects for electronically-enabled, participatory governance?

The executive group indicated that there is much potential for e-governance, but identified an urgent need for a clear focus and purpose. One member spoke of the existence of brief online consultations and a desire to expand into online forums, perhaps e-panels and 'maybe even a blog or two ... something a bit more interactive that people can feed back to and kind of involve people a bit more.' Another member of this group commented, 'there's a lot of room for development, but it is difficult because it becomes political.' In general the executive group thought the prospects for e-enabled participation were generally good but as one member commented, 'there has got to be a need – if you set up a slot on your website for this kind of function people are going to start trying to fill it with things and I think you've got to have a need. There's got to be a purpose.' In addition, the topics have to arouse public interest to the extent that they participate actively; earlier experiments with online forums had not been successful 'because the topics weren't interesting enough and they weren't promoted enough and the councillors felt they were spending too much time on them.' Consequently the online forums were removed from the site. It was felt that if e-participation was to be encouraged, it would have to be led and supported by the senior management team and that currently priorities and resources were focused elsewhere.

The web administrators' views tended to be parochial. They spoke of limited prospects for further citizen engagement in relation to the processes or functions in which they are involved. There had been an experiment to engage local school pupils with elected representatives, but little else. One of the web administrators commented, 'of the citizens using the website possibly only 10% are even interested in participation, so the Council could spend a lot of money and effort trying to engage people who aren't interested.' Responding quickly to emails was viewed as a reasonable way of engaging with the public. The elected councillors were rather wary of the prospect of e-enabled participation. The general view was that the councillors' individual pages (linked to the website) were little used. The vast majority of citizens use e-mail, letters or telephone to communicate with councillors. One of the participants had taken part in the young people's forum mentioned by the web administrator and reported it to be very difficult to deal with in terms of i) typing ability (or lack thereof), ii) sticking to a regular pattern for going online, and iii) dealing with several contributors simultaneously. In general the councillors felt that e-mail and the traditional methods of communication were adequate and could not see any great advantage in exploiting the e-government platform for citizen engagement. In sum, there was a discernable divergence of view between the three groups. In general, members of the executive group were most positive; they could at least see some potential in online forums and blogs. The other two groups were less enthusiastic; neither could see how the web might be exploited to add clear value to citizen/state interactions.

4.3 Research question III: Do they share a view of barriers to e-enabled participation and how these might be overcome?

Considering potential barriers to e-enabled citizen participation, the executive group identified resistance from other stakeholders. One commented, 'There is resistance to us spending the time on it and I'm not really sure how we get over that hurdle.' Additionally, there is perceived to be a general lack of interest and support (political, managerial and financial) for proactively engaging the public via the web; one of the executive group commented, 'I'm sure they (senior management) are aware of it and probably think well we'll just be doing it somehow without it involving resource or money or time

or anything else.' Lack of resources has prevented the production of a strategy document, 'I wouldn't like to have a document out there that wasn't backed up by any kind of resource- that would be kind of pointless.' There is a feeling that the Council will engage citizens when it is forced to 'from above…. when further assessments from the Audit Commission will be the stick.' The web administrators also identified resources as problematical, 'the resources have not been put in behind it in order to deliver what we should have. The technology's there but we don't have the people to put it in place.' Unlike the other two groups, the elected councillors viewed the barriers not in terms of resources or managerial support, but very simply in terms of their preferences for more traditional channels of communication both amongst their peers and citizens. The councillors remained unconvinced that the Web had much to offer over and above the communication channels they currently exploited and opined that citizens seemed happy enough to email, telephone or 'clobber us in the street'.

In sum, there is a divergence of views between groups, with the executive group identifying numerous barriers including lack of managerial support, resistance from other stakeholders, resource constraints and a general lack of urgency. Members of this group regarded the support of senior management, availability of resources and culture change of culture as the only ways of overcoming barriers and making progress with e-participation. Echoing the executive group, the web administrators also identified resource issues as a major barrier, but considered senior management support and the need for a change of culture less critical to future success. As a group the web administrators focused more on current issues in their departments and were less concerned with the overall prospects of the website for citizen engagement than the executive group. For their part, the elected councillors expressed a preference for current methods of communication; they claimed also that citizens prefer these methods and would very possibly be unable to see the attraction of more extensive use of web-based tools such as online forums, consultations or blogs. The councillors could discern no obvious value proposition in exploiting the web to engage with citizens in their ward. Perceived barriers for this group included lack of obvious purpose, difficulties in engaging with numerous users simultaneously, and raising expectations beyond what could reasonably be delivered. In aggregate it may be concluded that the results of the empirical research reported in this paper indicate a divergence of views amongst all three groups of stakeholders in relation to each of the research questions. Table 1 provides a summative overview of the key issues and views expressed by the three groups:

Table 1: Key issues and views identified by the three groups of stakeholders

Council Officers (executive)	Council Officers (Web Administrators)	Elected Councillors
Purpose of website:		
Information provision	Information provision	Information provision
Enabling transactions	Enabling transactions	Encouraging communication
Service improvement	Signposting services	Encouraging citizen consultation
Self-service	Easy access to services	Enabling citizen engagement
Efficiency	-	Efficiency
-	Relieving staff	-
- Prospects for eParticipation:	-	Transparency
Online consultations	Responding to emails quickly	Limited (councillors web pages little used by citizens)
Online forums	Costly in terms of time & money	Numerous difficulties with forums
Blogs	Lack of citizen interest	Emails, letters & phone calls preferred
Generally costly: time & money	-	-
Barriers to eParticipation:		
Resistance from other internal stakeholders	-	Preference for other channels
Lack of interest & support from above	Lack of resources: have the technology but not the people	-
Lack of urgency	-	-
-	-	Lack of clear purpose
-	-	High opportunity cost

5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings suggest that the borough council involved in the research is not focusing on achieving the i2010 e-democracy objective of putting in place tools to support effective public debate and citizen participation. The primary aim of the website is to improve service delivery, facilitate self-service and release staff from the burden of telephone and over-the-counter enquiries. Interestingly, for the Planning Department the website has actually increased the volume of enquiries as citizens download information about local planning applications from the website then, armed with the information, visit the department to discuss the issues further. Uniquely, employees in the Planning Department have seen their workload *increase* as citizens self-serve via the web. At least one participant expressed the view that the council would be unlikely to put the necessary infrastructure in place for citizen participation unless it was forced to do by Government targets and audit.

Tentative forays into online consultations and forums have been made by the team responsible for website development. These have not been resourced however, and according to members of the executive decision-making group, have met with some resistance from elected representatives. It is perhaps not entirely surprising that councillors appear resistant; their response echoes Coleman's (2004) findings that politicians may need to be re-educated to take full advantage of the dialogic features of the web. It is worth noting that the executive group felt that the councillors thought that too much time and effort was being spent on online forums; the councillors themselves expressed no such view in the interviews. On the contrary, in contrast to Ekelin's (2006) study, the councillors appear willing to engage with citizens using electronic media; they are comfortable using e-mail, but simply see no particular need or any obvious value in exploiting Web-based dialogic tools. If these are the be developed successfully in line with the i2010 e-democracy objective, then councillors will have to be persuaded that these offer real value over and above the existing communication tools. Even then, a number of barriers need to be overcome. The councillors spoke of abandoning the traditional face to face 'councillor surgery' since nowadays few people have the time or inclination to visit a physical office at a set time. There is a sense in which discussion forums require a regular presence such that the parameters of the interaction are understood and agreed; they offer little value if updated infrequently or irregularly, and at least one of the councillors expressed a worry that an initial flurry of activity on a popular discussion forum might simply trigger unrealistic expectations about councillor availability. Councillors evaluate web-based dialogue in terms of opportunity cost and appear limited by a fear that it may be very time-consuming to maintain *and* may not actually reach many constituents.

In aggregate, the findings of this study indicate a lack of shared vision amongst key stakeholders responsible for implementing e-enabled participation. Whilst hesitating to generalise on the basis of one, relatively small case study, the interim results sound a note of caution. As one of the executive group commented, 'What the Government thought it was setting out to achieve and what it actually achieved are two slightly different things to be honest. The aspirations were great but really all that it resulted in was a lot of box-ticking.' Little surprise then that resources are lacking, or that those at the front-line (the elected councillors) have a number of concerns about the implications of e-democracy. To be successful Web-enabled engagement needs to have a clear purpose and be well-resourced. There also needs to be careful consideration of how dialogue is to be managed at a very practical, operational level. This case study suggests that the practical implications have not been comprehensively considered, nor the appropriate resources put in place. We need to consider how e-participation might work best in practice; there is little merit in developing ambitious strategies if councillors cannot be persuaded to exploit the opportunities presented. In this sense this case study suggests that little has been achieved since the UK Local Government e-democracy project (ended March 2006) concluded that elected representatives need to understand how to design tools and methods, and selecting tools that are fit for purpose; which tools to use in which context for which purpose. We need to understand better how to support our elected representatives in such a way that they see clear benefits in web-enabled participation for particular issues or contexts. Perhaps the optimal approach is organic growth; e-participation encouraged on an issue-by-issue, case-by-case basis to allow elected representatives and citizens alike to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence to use the web to communicate, debate and engage with each other.

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