Electronic Democracy? The Impact of New Communications Technologies on Australian Democracy

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Democratic Audit of Australia

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Abbreviations

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ACA	Australian Consumers' Association
ACOSS	Australian Council for Social Service
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AEC	Australian Electoral Commission
CD ROM	compact disc read-only memory
DVD	digital video disc
FOI	Freedom of Information
GMS	Government Members' Secretariat
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
IPA	Institute for Public Accuracy
ISPs	internet service providers
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	non-government organisation
SMS	short message service
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
VEC	Victorian Electoral Commission
WAI	Web Accessibility Initiative

The Democratic Audit of Australia – Testing the strength of Australian democracy

Since 2002, the Democratic Audit of Australia, at the Australian National University has been conducting an audit to assess Australia's strengths and weaknesses as a democracy.

The Audit has three specific aims:

(1) *Contributing to Methodology*: to make a major methodological contribution to the assessment of democracy—particularly through the study of federalism and through incorporating disagreements about 'democracy' into the research design;

(2) *Benchmarking*: to provide benchmarks for monitoring and international comparisons—our data can be used, for example, to track the progress of government reforms as well as to compare Australia with other countries;

(3) *Promoting Debate*: to promote public debate about democratic issues and how Australia's democratic arrangements might be improved. The Audit website hosts lively debate on democratic issues and complements the production of reports like this.

Background

The Audit approach recognises that democracy is a complex notion; therefore we are applying a detailed set of Audit questions already field-tested in various overseas countries. These questions were pioneered in the United Kingdom with related studies in Sweden, then further developed under the auspices of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance—IDEA—

in Stockholm, which recently arranged testing in eight countries including New Zealand. We have devised additional questions to take account of differing views about democracy and because Australia is the first country with a federal system to undertake an Audit.

Further Information

For further information about the Audit, please see the Audit website at: http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au

Funding

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Executive summary

The aim of this focused audit is to review the impacts that new computing and communications technologies have had on democratic processes and participation in Australia. The review includes consideration of 'obvious' new media technologies, like the popularisation of the internet, World Wide Web, and electronic mail, as well as the more pervasive use of computer technology in political and government institutions and organisations.

This bundle of systems and services represents a significant change to the technological backdrop of Australian society. The past 20 years have seen the acceleration and intensification of the use of computers and other digital communications technologies, with significant impacts on the economic and social life of Australians, as well as having considerable implications for political participation and democracy.

Within this broad area of public debate two strong theoretical positions can be located. On the one hand, there are arguments that these tools have specific structural impacts such as increasing access to information at low cost—a technologically determinist point of view. On the other hand, there is the social shaping of technology view—that technologies reflect the people and politics that create them. While these debates are ongoing, the impacts of information and communications tools on democratic cultures can be both positive and negative, reflecting the nature of Australia's wider political culture, logics of political life, and the creativity of individuals and organisations in the application of these tools.

To assess these impacts this audit focuses on four key areas of democratic life in Australia and the implications of new technology therein: Australia's system

of party and representative rule; elections and campaigning; non-government organisations and civil society institutions; and the public sector that serves government and the citizenry.

A complex pattern emerges in relation to each of these areas, drawn from quantitative and qualitative studies, and the use of case analysis. Overall, the audit demonstrates that new media technologies have not, in themselves, led to a dramatic opening up of democratic institutions or organisations in Australia. Key aspects of the political system such as parties, parliaments and the public service, are no more open to public participation following the introduction of these technologies than they were prior to their advent.

In part, this reflects the fact that, in themselves, computers and communications technologies have no direct political implications. Whereas these systems provide numerous possibilities for greater, wider, or deeper public participation, parties, parliaments, and government departments have not been particularly proactive in taking on these opportunities to enhance participation. This represents the relatively conservative nature of the Australian political system and culture, rather than a necessary failure of the technologies to deliver some promised new era of openness.

Again, however, it must be recognised that this generalisation is only part of the overall—and ongoing—process of adaptation to what has been called the 'information age'. Numerous examples are presented in this audit of actions taken to open up the political system: either through increasing the amount of information available to individual citizens about the views, operations, or decisions of major political institutions, or in the direct provision of new points of access into the political arena.

Thus, a balanced finding of the implications of technological change is presented, and in each of the five focal areas explored, we can see positive and progressive use of new technology, as well as cynical or anti-democratic activities. Some particularly positive examples include:

- Innovations in political parties, particularly the minor parliamentary parties, to facilitate greater participation in their operations and greater exposure to their views outside the mainstream commercial media;
- New forms of direct communication between the public and individual representatives and candidates;

- Enhanced forms of participation by government organisations through the provision of information online, explicit use of online systems that allow the public to comment on policy making processes, electronic voting systems, and the development of community access projects to enhance the wider availability of new technologies to the community; and
- The active and innovative role of some parts of civil society in developing alternative news and media vehicles, virtual protest and pressure groups, and the mobilisation of citizens into political action.

Negatives include:

- The general avoidance of direct communication by government and government agencies with members of the community, particularly in processes of policy development. While new media represents an opportunity for the political elite of Australia to engage the community in new ways, this opportunity has been largely unrealised;
- The limited role that new communications technology has had on electoral competition and the ongoing dominance of political communication by large, but highly concentrated mass media;
- The resource barriers preventing greater use of new technology by Australia's civil society in fostering grassroots participation and access to the policy processes (their own, and to government);
- The increasing use of technology to monitor citizens' behaviour (online and offline), and the recent tendency towards Australia becoming a 'surveillance society'; and
- A general reluctance in the wider Australian community to engage politically using the variety of new communications channels available.

Overall the audit notes that the process of developing an information society remains an ongoing project. Many Australians still remain relatively excluded from the new opportunities brought by technology, and political actors (in and outside of government) continue to learn and experiment with the technologies and the possibilities they bring. Given the high speed of change in our digital age, there remains the distinct possibility that we are on the cusp, rather than in the midst, of more significant democratic implications.

Declarations of interest

Dr Peter Chen, primary contributor to the chapters on the Australian public sector and the electoral impacts of ICTs, currently serves as a non-paid community representative on the Victorian Parliamentary Subcommittee on Information Technology and has previously acted as a paid consultant to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry on Electronic Democracy.

Dr Karin Geiselhart, primary contributor to the chapter on civil society, currently serves as an advisor with Computing Assistance Support and Education Association (CASE) and has previously been employed by the Commonwealth Government's National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE).

Peter Chen and Karin Geiselhart have had some formal involvement with the On Line Opinion website / National Forum organisation discussed in this document.

Introduction

The aim of this focused audit is to assess the democratic impacts that new communications and computing technologies, like the internet, digital media, and advanced mobile telephones, have had on the quality of democratic life in Australia.

The introduction of these technologies into the community over the past 15 years has had dramatic impacts on the social and economic life of Australians. Digital technologies, global connectivity, and the raft of information and communications services they have provided have been instrumental in accelerating the general trend towards integration of Australia into the global community. They have devalued some forms of industrial production while creating new industries around content and online services. They have introduced new modes of work and employment, social relationships and philosophies of life.

In the 1990s there was widespread anticipation of revolutionary changes to the nature of human economic and social organisation—changes that have not, as yet, been realised. Nonetheless, it is important to consider the pace of change and the extent to which these technologies have become modern necessities of life and work. As with the advent of any disruptive technology with significant social implications, there are bound to be direct and subtle impacts on the political process of Australia.[1] These impacts have the prospect of advancing or reducing the quality of democratic participation and governance.

This report will examine the impacts of new communications and computing technologies on the overall character of democracy in Australia by looking first at the unique characteristics of this technology and then focusing on the four core

[1] Clayton Christensen, 1997, *The Innovators' Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail*, Boston MA, Harvard Business School Press

focal areas of the Democratic Audit:

1. Political equality
2. Popular control of government
3. Civil liberties and human rights
4. Quality of public debate

The audit is completed by looking, in some detail, at major aspects of the Australian political landscape: from political parties and elected representatives, to the impact of digital media on the public sphere and citizen discourse and participation.

Technology and its relationship to democratic practice

Technologies of all kinds have both direct and indirect impacts on the democratic life of a nation. On one level, technology serves as the substance of political dispute and negotiation—over technologies that create and destroy industries, over the ethics of technological applications, or over the appropriate level of government involvement in fostering new industries. On another level, technology serves as an essential (but only partial) tool in facilitating democratic government and its supporting administrative functions and institutions.

As technologies develop, these changes have impacts on existing political processes, assumptions, and practices. This is particularly true in mass society, where a large amount of the day-to-day interaction we have with the processes of government and decision-makers is *mediated* – communicated and interpreted – through our mass and select media industries. As these media evolve, they change the relationship between policy-makers and their constituents, and the way policy-makers are perceived and their performance evaluated.

Thus, as an example, the advent of the telegraph in the late 19th century, changed political process in a variety of ways:[2]

- Elected representatives were more easily contactable when they were away from their electorates and could consult with staff and constituents during parliamentary sessions. This led to an acceptance that elected representatives—even when absent from their electorates—would be responsive to the views of their constituents outside the formal process of election;
- Information could travel faster than people, providing decision makers with greater access to information of immediate importance, and transmitting the decisions of MPs faster and wider than ever. Elected representatives

[2] Bruce Bimber, 2003, *Information and American Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

were increasingly seen as people who should be able to access and assess information quickly and with skill, and who would be increasingly accountable for their actions as reported by the news media

Each successive technology, therefore, has a political application and implication. These can support, undermine, or restructure the specific work of formal policy makers (party officials, members of parliament, key bureaucrats), and informal ones (media, academia, opinion leaders), while at the same time changing the popular relationship between the public, their leaders, and political institutions.

The advent of television, for example, and its incorporation within the parliaments of Australia, has changed the operations and focus of parliamentary business towards the short exchanges of question time, which provide the nightly news with good material for broadcast. This reflects the structural impacts of technological change and the new realities of the production and distribution of knowledge.[3]

Information and communications technology

The focus of this analysis is the democratic impact of a bundle of technologies that are commonly referred to as *Information and Communications Technologies*, or ICTs. The notion of focusing on ICTs in general, rather than just one specific technology, like the internet, addresses the tendency for the introduction of digital technologies to bring together a range of communications and computing technology into multi-purpose and inter-operable devices.

Discussion about political change has been stimulated by the advent of the World Wide Web, as a specific submedium of the internet with characteristics making it relatively open to participation and access. The analysis here, however, recognises a range of changes associated with ICTs that need to be taken into consideration, from desktop computing to the spread of personal digital devices through our community. At the same time, we recognise that the information processing and storage capabilities of large organisations like government departments and political parties have increased greatly over the past two decades, and so the capability of government and other political institutions to hold, store, analyse, and synthesise political information is given special consideration in this analysis.

Technological characteristics of ICTs

Our emphasis on ICTs relates to the interoperability and interconnectivity of a range of technologies. This reflects the extraordinary expansion in networked

[3] Marshall McLuhan, 1964, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, London, Taylor & Francis

communication systems, and the shift from the use of analogue to digital technologies to store and transmit information that can be rapidly and perfectly duplicated for redistribution.

The result of these two core characteristics of ICTs, commonly referred to as an ongoing process of *convergence*, can be seen in:

- The rapid development of the internet in linking together computers that once served only as 'stand alone' devices with limited ability to share and exchange information;
- The evolution of personal computers, from complex, but limited 'adding machines' and 'word processors', into multimedia entertainment devices and general communications tools that provide access to all forms of media (text, images, animations and video) and an increasing array of communications such as e-mail, Web browsing, telephone and videophone calls, and fax transmission;
- The increased incorporation of computing power into all manner of household and workplace devices such as mobile telephones, photocopiers, refrigerators, television sets, washing machines and cars;
- The portability and pervasiveness of information services throughout our environment (portable consumer electronics); and
- The rapid expansion in the professional training and demand for the range of technical experts, such as computer programmers, digital content creators, information architects, web designers, etc., required to develop and service these technologies.

This notion of convergence does not imply that one specific device will emerge that will contain all the functions that we want from our electronic tools,[4] but that digital information will become highly portable across a wide range of products, and that citizens and consumers will be increasingly immersed in, or reliant upon the support of, these virtual environments.

This process of convergence remains ongoing, however, and while it is often assumed that this will lead to greater and more powerful personal computers, it may take different forms: such as increasingly redefining personal technologies like mobile telephones, or changing the type of relationship we have with media companies from one of passive consumption towards highly personalised packages of tailored news and entertainment.

[4] Marc Saltzman, 2004, 'Convergence is king with today's devices', *USA Today*, 16 September

The significance of the combination of technologies has been most apparent in recent years with the advent of the world wide web as a popular media form. The web typifies the power of computerisation and digitisation in that:

- The capacity of web-based information to be exchanged in digital form makes the transmission of this content very fast, low cost, and infinitely replicable;
- The computers used to display web content allow for interactivity between the user and the content, and interactivity between different computers. This not only allows content to be dynamic, but also for more complex and intelligent information services to be developed; and
- Whereas other media such as broadcasting or print are usually one-way, the internet can be a fully interactive medium. Users can be consumers, editors, publishers, commentators, and audiences all in the same session.

One consequence of these characteristics is that users of networked digital technologies have access to a massive global library. Perhaps more important, the capacity to participate in interactive content, and be a simultaneous producer and consumer of content, redefines our view of what media consumers do. While traditional theories of reception always considered media audiences active, in that their background and points of view shaped their relationship to 'push' or non-interactive media, the new media environment finds that consumers are highly active—either in terms of expressing strong preferences through the choices they make, or demanding the right to reply to content provided through comments and online virtual communities.

In addition, the comparatively low cost of production and distribution has dramatically changed classic business models associated with selling content. While some mainstream media organisations have been effective in making the transition online using a range of tried and true business models (like subscription services, or advertising), those in the traditional content industries are having some difficulty adjusting to the new realities of information abundance and substitutability.[5]

Key implications and trends

The process of technological change and development has been, and will continue to be, profound. Some critical social and economic changes have been:

[5] Doug Brown, 2003, 'Searching for online gold', *American Journalism Review*, June.

- Shifts away from manufacturing towards creative and innovation-based industries such as the creation of media content, online and other services, programming and software development, and knowledge management. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimated in 2002 that nearly 40 per cent of the Australian workforce were engaged in knowledge-based industries, up from 33 per cent in 1989;[6]

- Shifting work and social relationships.[7] These are particularly evident in the ability of people to maintain relationships (social or economic) at a distance and both work and play online. Individuals are spending time interacting with each other using new technologies, as well as engaging in wholly new forms of interaction through the technologies themselves. Recent surveys show the amount of time Australians are spending online has been increasing, related to diffusion of technologies that deliver pervasive and rich media content;[8]

- Changes to the relative economic importance of technologies. The production, sale, programming, and maintenance of digital technologies, has become a significant part of many developed economies. The export of ICT-related goods and services from Australia increased 34 per cent between 1999 and 2001 with corresponding increases in employment.[9] This has relevance for the political power and social status of those engaged in this marketplace; and

- Convergence in the market structures of organisations that produce, distribute, and sell digital information and content.[10] In line with the technical convergence witnessed in recent years, it is possible to identify a matching convergence (mergers, acquisitions, and collaborative business ventures) in the media and communications industry around the world. This aggregation of media ownership and production has important political, economic, and cultural implications.

This, of course, raises questions about how societies access and use information. While the common perception is that the amount of available information has increased in the 'new media' age—a positive democratic outcome—we also

[6] The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2002, 1375.0 *Measuring a Knowledge-based Economy and Society—An Australian Framework*, Canberra, ABS

[7] Irene Hardhill and Anne Green, 2003, 'Remote working—altering the spatial contours of work and home in the new economy', *New Technology, Work & Employment*, 18(3): 212-222

[8] Choice, 2005, *Broadband frenzy leads to more time online*, Sydney, Australian Consumers' Association

[9] Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA), 2003, *An Overview of the Australian ICT Industry and Innovation Base*, Based on work undertaken by the Framework for the Future Mapping Working Group, DCITA, Canberra: 5,7

[10] Edward Herman and Robert McChesney, 1997, *The Global Media*, London, Cassell

need to note concerns, such as:

- The loss of local content production in a competitive environment where international media have a significant advantage through syndication;
- Difficulties determining the reliability of information found online;
- The possibility that citizens will over-specialise in their information consumption habits, losing a connection to wider issues or points of view different from their own; and
- Differential levels of access to the new media environment, particularly for people with lower economic means, with disabilities, and the aged.

Political impacts of ICT

At a personal level, the low barriers to participation in the age of digital production can encourage the view that the advent of these technologies provides the wider public with new tools for self expression, including political expression, that have been denied while media access was subject to traditional barriers of cost or bandwidth.

This observation has led to new language to describe the type of society where participation in mass (broad reach) media becomes more open and participative:

- The remixing of existing content, sometimes called 'rip, mix and burn', making popular commercialised cultural products open to the general public to take, modify and distribute;
- Breaking down of some of the traditional preserves of professionals such as control over information ('citizen journalism'), publishing and distribution ('wikis' or collaborative publishing online), or even personal services such as the use of the internet to access medical information or engage in online 'self-help';[11]
- The ability to form new types of civic organisation using technology, breaking down traditional barriers of place and time;[12] and
- The use of the technology to undertake specific political activities, such as voting or consultation online.

Clearly, there are good examples of this open or free cultural approach embracing the digital age: the number of non-commercial and private journals, magazines,

[11] Mary Griffiths, 2004, '"Keeping it real" – or just an exercise in making it easier to govern? Media trainings, life events, the bloggosphere, and the e-citizen' *Proceedings of the Australian Electronic Governance Conference 2004*, 14-15 April, University of Melbourne, CD ROM

[12] Peter Chen, 2004, 'A comparative analysis of the political email lists', *Proceedings of he Australian Electronic Governance Conference 2004*, 14-15 April, University of Melbourne, CD ROM

and 'blogs' published online has continued to grow over the last decade. Currently it is estimated that 50 million people around the world produce an online journal.[13] More recently, the growth of 'podcasts' (online serialised audio content) and 'vlogs' (online video diaries) has illustrated that the internet, as an open network, does encourage active participation in this new media.

On the other hand, while these phenomena point to increasing public interest in the 'active consumption' of digital media, the vast majority of global technology users remain relatively inactive in their response to open media access. As the Pew Internet & American Life Project revealed in 2004, large proportions of United States (US) internet users were largely passive in their use of the technology, browsing for news and current affairs issues, but not engaged as active content creators—a shift in the *technology* of media consumption, but not the *ideology* of media consumption. This view of the limited creative use of new media has been confirmed by similar Australian research.[14]

In terms of the fourcriteria of direct concern to this focused audit, the properties of the new ICTs carry obvious promises and challenges:

1. From the perspective of political equality, new ICTs offer the opportunity for widening the pool of active participants in politics. If information is power then the internet clearly can act as a democratising and equalising force, providing individuals with a vast array of alternative information sources, accessible virtually instantaneously. In addition, it offers a forum to those who might previously have been unable or unwilling to engage in debate on issues of concern to them. On the downside, there is the issue of the digital divide to consider. New channels for communication and influence are equalising forces only insofar as they allow for all viewpoints to be heard. Until universal access is achieved, the potential for enhanced political equality will be qualified.

2. The new ICTs provide the possibility of a window into government for citizens and for governments to engage in more extensive forms of citizen consultation. Such forms of online consultation need to be carefully designed, however, and there have been a number of failed experiments. Moreover government websites do not always meet community needs in terms of accessibility of information and the storage of digital records. They rarely provide detailed information about how the organisation works. Whether new ICTs serve to enhance popular control of government is still

[13] Riley, Duncan, 2005, 'Number of blogs now exceeds 50 million worldwide', *The Blog Herald*, April, http://www.blogherald.com/2005/04/14/number-of-blogs-now-exceeds-50-million-worldwide

[14] L. Rainie, M. Cornfield, and J. Horrigan, 'The internet and campaign 2004', 6 March 2005, The Pew Research Center, www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_2004_Campaign.pdf); Parliament of Victoria, 2005, *Victorian Electronic Democracy Inquiry: Final Report*, Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee

open to question.

3. One area of new ICT development that has provoked some concern is in the domain of civil liberties and rights. While overall the internet has been seen as freeing up information and speech, especially for those living under authoritarian regimes, it is useful to remember that the technology is not, as has been noted above, inherently democratic. Cyberspace opens up new possibilities for surveillance and monitoring of individuals' behaviour. Internet Service Providers (ISPs), as well as more malicious external forces can keep track of one's web browsing habits. Unauthorised copying and distribution of private correspondence is more easily facilitated and difficult to trace. Issues of privacy, therefore, loom large for any democratic assessment of new ICTs' potential.

4. The openness of internet space invariably means that not all voices heard will be of the measured and deliberative kind that deliver a high quality of public debate. Indeed the issue of 'flaming' or abusive verbal exchanges online have become something of a well-known problem for discussion forums and internet chat rooms. Some political parties for example have had to shut down their discussion boards due to fears of legal action and negative media coverage. Including a moderator, however, can also lead to stifling and controlling of debate, particularly in the anonymous online environment, where deletion of entries to the debate is a matter of cut and paste.

Overall, new ICTs can be seen as yielding considerable pluses against our four criteria but also some likely negatives. Weighing up these pros and cons, scholars have emerged with a number of both optimistic and pessimistic predictions for the future.

The optimistic scenario focuses on the potential of the new technology to provide open access to new and alternative forms of political information and the capacity to engage directly in public debate. As an increasingly global medium with low barriers to entry relative to a commercial news firm, the internet can be seen as a new and dynamic 'public sphere' of educative public debate and political socialisation, and a low-cost tool for political organisation and action.[15]

The dystopic scenario focuses on the capacity for large organisations such as governments, commercial interests and media corporations to manipulate these technologies towards their own interests and objectives. A distinction may be drawn between Version 1.0 and Version 2.0 of the internet: a comparison

[15] Stephen S. Lax, 2004, 'The internet and democracy' in *Web Studies*, 2nd edition, David Gauntlett and Ross Horsley (eds), New York, Oxford University Press

between the anarchic open days of the early internet where user participation was high and this emphasis upon participation focused on the 'gift economy', as opposed to recent moves by governments to regulate online activities and corporations to develop business models that commercialise the technology and place greater barriers to accessing online information ('walled gardens'[16]).

For those concerned with the power of authoritarian states to misuse these technologies, examples of online censorship, the use of expansive citizen profiling technologies, and covert government attacks against democratic media or political organisations are cited as evidence that the technology—while open in design—is increasingly being brought back under state control. In addition, it is argued that the new power of computing will equip governments with increased ability to scrutinise the lives of their citizens and monitor their behaviour, either through tracking our 'virtual lives' or by the synthesis and aggregation of large amounts of disparate information government agencies hold about their citizens.

Conclusion: A balanced audit

If either of the optimistic or dystopic positions were entirely accurate, this review would be relatively concise. Professor Stephen Coleman of the Oxford Internet Institute recently noted that there are a number of implicit assumptions underpinning questions related to the political impact of technologies.[17] In this case, the assumptions are that there is a completed project called the internet and another completed project called democracy, and the essential research question is simply a task of assessing how the latter accommodates the former.

As Coleman observed, both of these projects remains incomplete. It is therefore clearly possible to show how greater media openness has led to pluralisation and new forms of political action and activity. On the other hand, governments and large commercial interests have attempted to use the technology to manufacture consent and suppress dissent. Both forces, democratic and autocratic, co-exist in a complex relationship that remains ongoing and provides the landscape of political action.

This review of the democratic impact of ICTs on democracy notes that:

- A balanced assessment of the impact of ICTs on Australian democracy needs to look across the range of institutions and activities that make up our democratic system;

[16] Graham Meikle, 2002, *Future Active: Media Activism and the Internet*, Annandale, Pluto Press

[17] Stephen Coleman on ABC Newsradio, 17 April 2004

- It needs to consider direct activities to increase, expand, or change democratic practices using new technology, as well as the wider socio-economic changes associated with these technologies; and
- To acknowledge that the democratic impacts may be complex, and multi-directional.

Political parties go online

In this chapter we examine how political parties have responded to the challenges and opportunities of ICTs, with a particular emphasis on how they have affected the parties' capacity to promote democratic values.

In order to do this it is probably most helpful to begin by outlining the key activities of modern political parties in democratic society. We identify eight key functions for political parties in this analysis:

- Voter socialisation;
- Education;
- Mobilisation;
- Leader recruitment;
- Articulation;
- Channelling;
- Aggregation of interests; and
- Policy-making.[18]

While all these functions are important for parties to perform, it is arguably in their role as aggregators of individual interests that they provide their most indispensable and unique service to democracy. Parties are a means by which society can reconcile conflicting individual demands and unite the mass of people behind broad policy platforms.

[18] Roy Macridis, 1967, 'Introduction: the history, functions, and typology of parties' in *Political Parties: Contemporary Trends and Ideas*, Roy Macridis (ed.), New York, Harper & Row

In order to perform these functions it is clear that parties need to collect and communicate a large amount of information. Changes to the communication and information processing capacities of these organisations, therefore, will hold significant implications for their abilities to perform such tasks.

As has been made clear in the introduction, ICTs significantly increase the amount and quality of communication and information that can flow through a society. In addition, the channel for grass-roots input is also significantly expanded, with new forms of interactive communication being offered in place of the one-way, point-to-mass style prevalent under the old media system. Finally, the more decentralised system of management of internet-based communication devolves much greater power to individual users over what they see and also allows them to be publishers of information.

For political parties these shifts in communication possibilities carry a number of major implications:

1. Their informational and educational capacity is expanded in that they have a new channel through which they can offer much greater amounts of material to voters;

2. Their mobilising capacity is expanded in that they can conduct a more interactive dialogue with both supporters and members, and with the broader public through e-mail, online consultative fora and chatrooms, as well as specially commissioned website question and answer sessions;

3. Their ability to articulate interests is enhanced given the greater opportunities for individuals and organisations to communicate their needs and demands in a more targeted and specific way; and

4. Their capacity to aggregate interests may undergo some diminution as their capacity to articulate increases. However, the interactive possibilities of the new media may provide new fora for debate and consensus-building.

To assess the impact of the new ICTs on parties' roles as democratic actors we will focus on these four aspects and seek to draw out the implications for citizens' equality of influence, control over government, rights and liberties, as well as quality of civil discourse. In undertaking this task we will also seek to engage with the broader debates about the overall health of political parties in advanced democracies, and to what extent they can be seen to be in decline.

Parties have been coming under increasing pressure to maintain and recruit new support as they move into the new millennium.[19] How far does the introduction of ICTs offer the possibility for breathing new life into the parties, securing if not a transformation then a reform and re-vitalisation of their ability to connect with voters and members?

On the other hand, are new technologies actually helping to foster the longer-term erosion of parties? As people are offered more means to articulate their own needs, does this ultimately loosen the parties' grip on securing the consensus necessary to legitimate government? While it is impossible to provide definitive answers to these questions only one decade after the new ICT revolution began, the evidence that does exist can be probed for signs of where trends are heading.

Informing, educating, and socialising[20]

Party websites

How are parties using new media to spread and manage information about themselves and their policy ideas?

The first source of evidence consists in party websites. Websites form one of the most publicly available and widely accessible new media applications that organisations can use to inform citizens of their goals. Table 1 shows the results of functional analysis of party websites was conducted in 2000, and updated in 2003. Party websites were awarded scores on the basis of:

- information provision, such as the availability of policy documents, party history, and press releases;
- resource generation, such as the appeals for donations, membership or the availability of merchandising (the higher scores being awarded for their extent and for the degree to which these transactions could be carried out on the site; and
- opportunities for participation, such as email/feedback features and chatrooms.

[19] Russell Dalton and Martin Wattenberg (eds), 2000, *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press

[20] The data sources utilised here are: Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward, 2002, 'Virtual campaigning: Australian parties and the impact of the internet', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 37(1), pp. 99–130; Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward, 2004, 'Letting the daylight in? Australian State parties and the WWW', in Rachel Gibson, Paul Nixon and Ian Ward (eds), Net Gain? Political Parties and the Internet, London, Routledge, pp. 139–161; Daniel Edwards, 2005, *The Use of Internet Communications Technologies by Global Social Movements in Australia*, unpublished PhD thesis, Canberra, Australian National University; Clive Bean, David Gow and Ian McAllister, Australian Election Study 2001 and 2004 and Rachel Gibson, David Gow, Clive Bean, and Ian McAllister, *Australian Candidate Study 2001* and *2004*, Australian Social Science Data Archive, Canberra, Australian National University; Interviews with federal party officials responsible for website management: ALP, Chief Information Officer (28/06/05); Liberal Party, Acting Web Manager (29/06/05); The Nationals, Office Manager (29/06/05); Australian Greens, National Manager and National Convenor (23 June 2005).

Table 1: Functions of party websites and dates of establishment				
	Date website established	Information Provision	Resource Generation	Participation/ interactivity
Parliamentary parties				
ALP	1994	11	6	2
Liberals	1996	5	1	2
Democrats	1997	10	2	3
Nationals	1998	5	1	1
One Nation	na	4	2	6
Greens	1998	6	6	4
Mean		6.83	3.0	3.0
Non-parliamentary parties				
Unity	1996	3	1	0
Christian Democratic Party	1997	5	1	1
Communist Party	na	3	2	2
National Action	na	3	2	0
Mean		3.5	1.5	0.75
Overall Mean		5.5	2.4	2.1
Score range		0 – 13	0 – 9	0 – 7

Source: Gibson and Ward, 'Virtual campaigning'

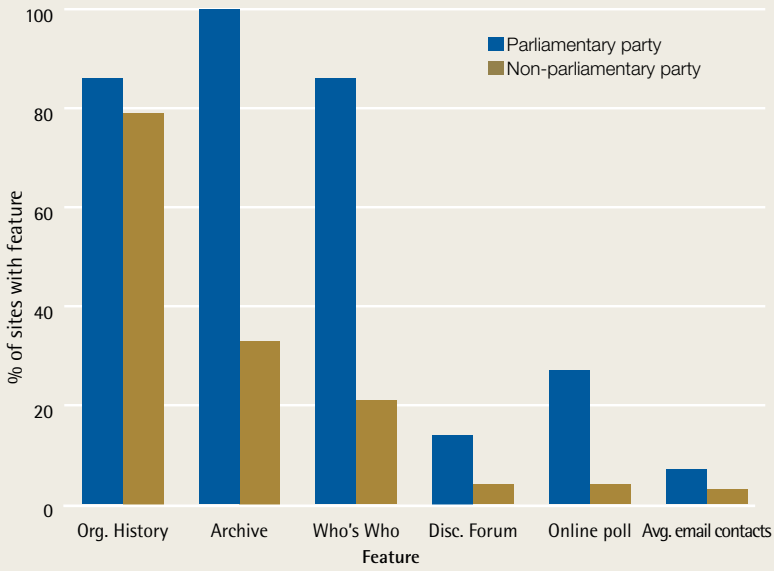
These results show first that the ALP were well ahead of their counterparts in setting up a site in 1994, most parties following two to three years later. In addition, the ALP also offered more information on their site, scoring in the top third of the information provision scale. Only the Australian Democrats performed as well. The other parties, particularly those without parliamentary representation, performed very poorly, averaging only around one third of the information features.

In 2001, a follow-up analysis of State sites for the ALP, the Liberals and the Australian Greens was conducted. These results showed that while most State branches maintained a site, the ALP did not dominate at the State level. Indeed, at the State level, neither of the two major parties offered highly informative or content-rich sites and did not clearly outpace the Greens in this regard. However, on more delivery-related features such as multimedia add-ons and accessibility and navigability, the two major parties performed better.

While the focus of analysis in the 2003 study was to compare parties' use of ICTs to other non-governmental actors, it did separate parliamentary from non-parliamentary parties and report the types of news and information features that appeared on their sites, as well as interactive features such as online discussion, e-mail feedback opportunities and donation facilities. This analysis, reported in Figure 1, reveals a similar picture to 2000.

Turning to the more qualitative data generated by interviews and questionnaires

Figure 1: Party website content 2003



Source: Edwards, *The Use of Internet Communications Technologies by Global Social Movements in Australia*

administered to party officials during this period we can draw a connection between what the parties wanted to do with their sites and what they actually delivered. The ranking of functions by communication staff from the five parliamentary parties is presented in Table 2. This table shows a clear understanding among the parties of the web as an information tool, with a lower emphasis being placed on its interactive and feedback possibilities.

Table 2: Functions of website (questionnaire data)*

Party	Increase votes	Recruit members	Provide info to public	Provide info to media	Member feedback	Voter feedback	Keep pace with IT
Liberals	4	3	4	3	3	3	4
ALP	3	1	3	2	3	3	2
Nationals	4	4	4	2	2	2	2
Democrats	4	3	3	3	3	3	1
Greens	1	1	4	2	0	1	0
Mean	2.5	2.8	3.5	2.5	2.1	2.1	1.8

* Question: Please indicate how important the following functions of the website are for the party using the following scale: 4 = most important; 3 = very important; 2 = quite important; 1 = somewhat important; 0 = of no importance.

Source: Gibson and Ward, 'Virtual campaigning'

Party databases

A further application of ICTs that can be used by parties for informing and educating the public is the construction and maintenance of databases of voters. Across Australia, parties with parliamentary representation are given access to the electoral roll to allow them to communicate with the public. Parties use this information in conjunction with internal databases to develop a greater level of personalised information about the voting public. These compound resources allow parties to identify particular segments of the electorate for receipt of customised political messages. This more precise means of delivery is particularly useful during election campaigns when voters are being pursued for their votes.

It has been discovered, however, although the smaller parties do make use of electronic data on voters in order to more effectively campaign, it is the larger parties that are making most extensive use of these tools. Efforts by the Greens and Democrats tend instead to be '…simple spreadsheets with lists of contacts',[21] whereas the ALP and the Liberals have developed much more sophisticated database software—that contain comprehensive and frequently updated constituency-level information on voters that enable them to target potential supporters. This finding was confirmed by candidate research in the 2004 federal

[21] Peter Van Onselen, 2004, 'Electoral databases: big brother or democracy unbound?', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 39(2): 349–66

election, showing that the major party candidates were four times more likely to utilise (draw from and add to) these resources during the election.[22]

The personnel and skill requirements to update and maintain these lists at the national level are significant and flow largely from the two parties' dominance in the House of Representatives. Through their parliamentary and electorate offices, MPs receive a considerable amount of information about their constituents that is logged electronically.

The one clear disadvantage of this decentralised method of compilation, however, is that the amount and quality of data entered varies according to the extent to which individual MPs and their staff will invest time in such activities. The Liberal Party in particular has attempted to ensure MPs make regular inputs into their database. In addition, being the governing party, it has further resources to draw on in the shape of the Government Members' Secretariat (GMS). Thus, although the web may be open to all, when it comes to the more strategic and electorally relevant uses of ICTs for information gathering and dissemination, the balance is much more clearly in the favour of the bigger parties.

Who is the audience?

Party officials largely view their websites as a means to convey information. However, the audience focus appears to have narrowed somewhat. While the results in Table 2 indicate that it was the general public that was regarded as one of the main recipients of the information offered online during the establishment phase of party websites, five years later officials from the two major parties, as well as the Greens and the Nationals, all identified members as a major focus of their online efforts.

The ability to offer a continuous and easily accessible updated source of information for the party faithful as well as staff across the country was regarded as a stand-out feature of the web. In addition, e-mail and particularly the distribution of e-newsletters to members were regarded as a great advantage. The Greens in the ACT reported that less than 10 per cent of their membership have opted to receive their newsletter in printed form. The ALP reported plans to move the party's publication *The Labour Herald* into an online only version. Finally, the Liberal Party reported that a change to the 2004 election site was to archive the sites from 1998 and 2001, this move being seen as signalling the websites' value as an information depository or resource.

[22] Peter Chen, 2006, 'e-election 2004? New media and the campaign' in *Mortgage Nation*, Marian Simms and John Warhurst (eds), Bentley, WA, API-Network

Of course it is one thing for the parties to use ICTs such as webpages to impart information. The success of such initiatives, however, clearly depends on individuals actually seeing their sites. Results from the Australian Election Studies of 1998, 2001 and 2004 offer insight into questions about the audience for the party sites as well as those seeking more general political information. As illustrated in Table 3 below, the proportion of those surveyed during each of these elections that had used the internet to get news and information has grown slowly over the three elections surveyed.

Table 3: Voter use of the internet for election news and information 1998–2004*

	1998		2001		2004	
Use of internet	All (%)	Internet access (%)	All (%)	Internet access (%)	All (%)	Internet access (%)
No internet access	73	/	41	/	33	/
Access, didn't use	20	84	50	84	55	82
Used at least once	7	16	9	17	12	18
Visit party site		na		5		5
Visit Australian Electoral Commission site		na		na		8
Visit mainstream news site		na		na		12
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(1,827)	(501)	(1,763)	(1,045)	(1,739)	(1,160)

*Question: 'Did you make use of the Internet at all to get news or information about the 2004 federal election?' and 'During the 2004 election campaign did you visit any of the following websites?'

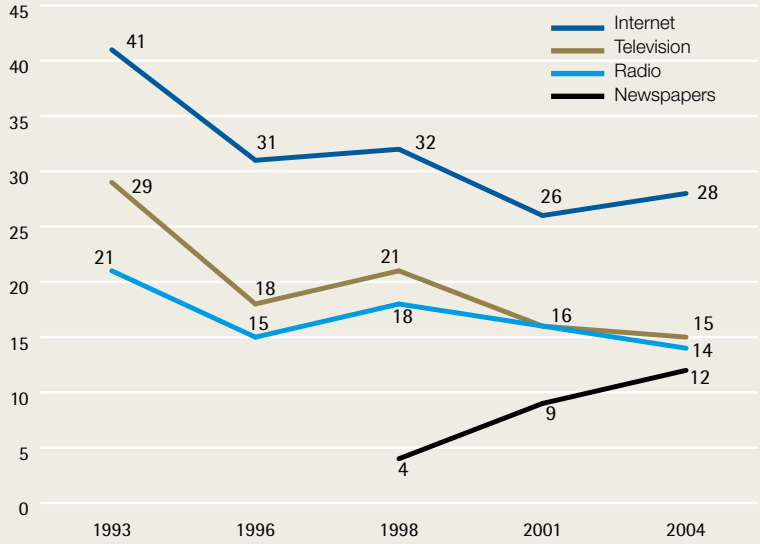
na = not available

Source Bean, et al. *Australian Election Study 2004*

As this table reveals, the level of interest in online news and information is not startlingly high. While it has been creeping up, it still compares rather unfavourably with those claiming to have accessed other forms of media for news. In a related study over 60 per cent of respondents reported some use of TV sources for news on the election. However, while use of the internet for news is rising, the usage of other mediums, particularly newsprint and radio, is declining (see Figure 2).[23]

[23] Rachel Gibson and Ian McAllister, 2005, *Does Cyber-Campaigning Win Votes? Online Communication in the 2004 Australian Election*, Center for the Study of Democracy Paper 05–09, University of California, Irvine

Figure 2: Media use during election campaigns: 1993 to 2004 (per cent)



Question: 'How much attention did you pay to reports about the election campaign in television/radio/the newspapers?' (per cent say 'a good deal'). 'Did you make use of the Internet at all to get news or information about the [1998/2001/2004] Federal election?' (percent say 'yes').

Sources: Australian Electoral Survey 1993-2004.

Thus, the importance of the internet as a disseminator of information can be expected to rise in subsequent elections. In terms of where users are going to get their political information, the evidence from the 2004 election reveals that mainstream news sites were among the most popular destinations for those online. The party sites fare relatively well, however, being the third most popular destination among those polled, after the Australian Electoral Commission's (AEC) site.

The comparison with 2001, however, reveals that the parties' efforts over the past few years have not yielded any significant increase in audience size, with five per cent of internet users choosing to visit party sites during both elections. In addition, compared to other countries these figures are somewhat low. In particular, reports from the US Presidential election revealed 52 per cent of internet users had visited either George Bush or John Kerry's sites during the course of the campaign.[24]

Overall, therefore, it would seem that parties in Australia are not currently using new ICTs to engage in widespread efforts to educate and inform voters to any

[24] See Rainie, Cornfield, and Horrigan, 'The Internet and Campaign'

great extent. The audience for the sites is relatively small. However, from the parties' perspective it appears that use of the technology to reach a narrower audience is not seen as wasted effort, with members and activists being seen as increasingly important targets for sites. Increased accessing of information by any citizens is, on the face of it, a laudable development. However, if that information acquisition is concentrated largely in the existing pool of activists then one can argue that the internet presents a more worrying possibility of shoring up and consolidating the existing power relations in society.

Citizen mobilisation

In this section we consider what the parties are doing to use the new media to promote citizen engagement and participation.

Connecting with the public

Based on the evidence from Table 1 and Figure 1 it is clear that parties have not made participation and feedback as strong a priority for their websites as the downward provision of information. While parties appear to give the 'nod' to using the technology for some interactive purposes (largely e-mail contacts), in general their sites do not feature many interactive features that promote dialogue with the grassroots.

On the whole, the parliamentary parties, and particularly the smaller ones, perform better on this feature than the non-parliamentary players. Further support for this finding is revealed in State-level analysis which has found Green party sites to be notably more interactive than those belonging to the ALP and Liberal Party.[25] Thus, it does not appear that party size and resources are critical to the operation of more dynamic facilities such as online question and answer sessions or chat rooms, at least outside the real fringe players.

Given these results, it is not surprising to find the parties ranking functions, such as voter and member feedback, lower in importance than information provision (see Table 2). However, the particularly low scores given by the Greens to these features is rather more challenging to reconcile, suggesting that while they offer these features they do not see them as priorities within the site. Conversely, whilst the major parties may say they value facilities for feedback using new ICTs, the evidence does not suggest they have put those values into practice very strongly.

Interviews with party officials during 2005 largely confirm this view. The idea of

[25] Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward, 2003, 'Letting the daylight in? Australian State parties and the WWW' in *Net Gain? Political Parties and the Internet*, Rachel Gibson, Paul Nixon and Ian Ward (eds) London, Routledge

web-based initiatives as a means to promote broader public engagement in policy-making was not prominent among the parties. Projects like the UK's Big Conversation started by the Labour Party in 2001 to foster national debate, for example, were not in evidence.[26] The Greens were among the most experimental of the parties running daily opinion polls on policy issues (and fending off malicious attacks designed to subvert the results). Some State parties had also operated open Bulletin Board Systems but had to close them down when the postings became too vitriolic.

Short Message Service (SMS) was also utilised by most of the parties during the 2004 election, but largely as an alerting and updating service rather than to try to reach younger voters (as the UK Labour Party tried in the 2001 General Election).

This is not to say that the parties were entirely static in their approach to the web. Most of the parties reported receiving around five to ten e-mails per day via their site, the Greens again being the stand-out party in this regard, reporting between 40–50 e-mails per day. Those that proved relatively simple were dealt with by the website/national office staff. Those requiring more in-depth responses were forwarded to the relevant individuals. In addition, a steady stream of queries about joining, donating or volunteering help were also reported by the parties, these being dealt with indirectly and passed onto the State branches.

We turn now to examine the question of online mobilisation by parties in more depth. Specifically, we look at the types of voters visiting the party sites. By examining the demographics, party affiliation and a range of attitudes and behaviours of those individuals, it becomes possible to draw some more informed conclusions about the extent to which parties' use of ICTs largely reinforces current participation biases among the electorate. Table 4 reports the findings from a breakdown of the 64 surveyed individuals that visited party sites during the 2004 election.

[26] http://thebigconversation.org

Table 4: Characteristics of visitors to party websites in 2004

	Visit party site (%)	Overall sample (%)
Socio-demographic characteristics		
Gender		
Male	56	48
Female	44	52
Age		
18-24	8	11
25-34	2	9
35-44	8	14
45-54	14	21
55-64	27	19
65+	42	26
Education		
Tertiary (p-grad/bachelors degree)	50	25
No qualification since leaving school	18	35
Employment		
Full-time	65	41
Student	11	3
Political attitudes		
Good deal of interest in the election	56	30
Partisan identification		
Liberal	30	42
National	2	3
ALP	28	32
Democrat	0	1
Green	20	5
Other	5	2
No Party	16	16
Very strong party supporter	36	21
(N)	64	1,769

Question: During the 2004 election campaign did you visit any of the following websites? …Party website (i.e. Liberals, ALP, Greens etc.)

Source: Bean et al. *Australian Election Study*, 2004

It is clear that the parties are certainly connecting with more committed and active individuals. While around 30 per cent of the sample overall express a great deal of interest in the election, just over half of those visiting the parties' sites did so. In addition these people are more likely to be male, older than 55 and possess a tertiary education or full-time job. Given that such individuals are typically more likely to participate than most other groups in society, the story does not sound encouraging for parties mobilising new people to engage with politics through ICTs. The fact that a greater number of strong supporters visit the party sites also indicates that the parties are preaching to the converted, if not members specifically.

In breaking down which parties are scooping the greatest audience for their sites online, however, the figures provide a somewhat more positive story. The minor parties are clearly using the technology to great effect to connect with their supporters. Twenty per cent of those visiting party sites reported identifying with the Green party, a figure distinctly out of proportion to the one in twenty in the wider population that identify with the Greens and a figure comparable with that for the two major parties.

Thus, it may be that while the technology at the individual level may be promoting the interests of those who are already active politically, the causes they support and the organisations they promote tend to be non-mainstream. At an organisational level, a mobilisation may be taking place through technologies such as the web and e-mail that is challenging existing power bases. Overall, therefore, this could be leading to a degree of redistribution of power and influence toward the smaller parties, which may result in a shift in how the political system, as a whole, is run.

Connecting with the party base

The evidence reported thus far concerns efforts by parties to use the new ICTs to reach out and engage the general public. However, intra-party networks, or intranets, can also be established by parties, allowing them to replicate these benefits internally, providing greater information and opportunities for input from their members. Information on the internal uses of the new ICTs is of course somewhat more difficult to obtain than data on websites. Interviews with officials from four of the parliamentary parties, however, indicates that at present none has formally established a system for internal electronic debate between members and party officials over matters of policy.

The most common feature is a members-only section of the national website which for the Liberals and Nationals is designed for office-holding members at

the State and federal levels, not the broader membership. The facility is thus a means of enhancing administrative efficiency within the party organisation, rather than increasing transparency for rank and file members or giving them a greater say in the running of the party.

The Greens operate a more open members-only section of their federal website, accessible to all, not just those with office-holding roles. In addition, the Greens also reported a series of listservs established by members with commercial hosting services such as Yahoo! These lists bring together a defined sub-group within the party such as State councillors or parliamentary staff. Such lists are clearly important to party operations although they do not appear to have an official role in party affairs, being managed by the groups individually.

The parties did report maintaining some type of e-mail database of interested individuals who signed up via the website for e-newsletters or to lend their support. In addition, parties expressed interest in developing member-specific e-mail lists, although none appeared to have a comprehensive list. The Greens in particular voiced strong concerns about the privacy implication of maintaining a national list, since membership was at the State level. Also the need to avoid 'spamming' members with unwanted e-mails was mentioned by the Greens as a downside of maintaining national lists. The Liberals reported sending a bi-weekly national newsletter via e-mail to members and interested individuals using a database of the addresses collected from those visiting the site (i.e. non-members).

Issue articulation

In this section we examine the extent to which the new media are allowing parties to articulate new demands that would otherwise not be heard in the political system. While this can occur through existing parties taking up new issues, it can also take place through the formation of new parties.

Pluralisation and the growth of parties

One simple way to examine this proposition is simply to count the number of voices in the system, as measured by the AEC registration of political parties. Thus, the first question we examine here is whether there has been a rise in the number of parties competing in elections since the mid-1990s when the technology first entered the public domain.

Using data from the AEC on party registration,[27] it would appear that there has actually been a decrease in the number of parties operating since the mid-1990s. As at May 2005 the figures reported in Table 5 from AEC statistics show 61 parties to be formally registered. Fifty of those 61 are recorded as having competed in the November 2004 federal election. The figures for 1996 report a total of 72 parties as officially registered at the time of the election. The AEC also provides a list of the de-registered parties dating from October 1988 to February 2005.

De-registration, whether done voluntarily by the party itself or imposed by the AEC,[28] can be seen as a clear indicator of party failure or extinction. Using these figures we can usefully compare the incidence of de-registration during the years 1988-1996 when internet use was minimal among the parties (as shown by website adoption in Table 1) and the period, 1997 up to 2005, when its use was more widespread.

What this comparison reveals, as shown in Table 5, is that more parties failed or were de-registered in the later nine-year period, with most of these occurring in the years from 1999 onward, when parties had wider access to the technology. Such results of course cannot prove conclusively that the internet failed to assist new parties in articulating their concerns (indeed, it may indicate the formation of other types of associations). However, this does challenge claims that the technology has helped to bring a host of new smaller players into the party system. Just at the time when parties were in a position to make use of the web and e-mail to spread their message, it would seem that record numbers have been collapsing. One cannot even claim that the increased number of de-registrations results from an increased number of parties forming, since as noted above, registrations across the period have not increased.

[27] www.aec.gov.au/_content/who/party_reg

[28] As a result of failure to endorse candidates or retain sufficient members.

Table 5: Number of de-registered parties 1988 to 2005	
Status	**Parties**
Registered	
Federal Election 1996	72
Federal Election 2004	61
De-registered	
Total 1988 – Feb 2005	82
Total de-registered 1988 – 1996	39
Total de-registered 1997 – 2005	43

Source: AEC List of De-registered Political Parties (Feb 2005)
http://www.aec.gov.au/_content/who/party_reg/deregistered/

A great leveller?

While the new communication technologies may not necessarily be increasing the number of new parties in the party system as a whole, it may still be the case that they are enhancing levels of interest articulation by levelling the playing field among existing players. The data reported earlier (Table 2) does shed some light on this question, with a divide emerging between the parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties in terms of the level of site functionality and content.

Table 6 reinforces this picture, reporting the delivery and design features of the party sites, as well as some measures of their popularity and visibility. The columns report summary scores on a range of aspects of site design ranging from the use of visual images and multi-media features ('glitz'), the presence of text only options, translation tools and software to assist the blind (access), site maps, search tools and menu bars (navigability), frequency of updates (freshness) and connectedness of the site to the wider web through in and out-bound links.

Table 6: Party website design and delivery

	Glitz Index	Access	Navigation	Freshness	Inbound links*	Outbound links**
Parliamentary parties						
ALP	5	1	6	6	130,000	39
Liberals	2	1	1	1	91,900	21
Democrats	2	0	5	5	191,000	29
Nationals	2	1	2	2	116,000	na
One Nation	1	0	1	1	32,400	1
Green	2	1	5	5	967,000	21
Mean	2.3	0.6	3.3	3.3	254,717	
Non-parliamentary parties						
Unity	2	0	1	1	16	na
Christian Democratic Pty	3	0	0	0	75	1
Communist	1	0	1	1	16	20
National Action	1	0	1	1	na	na
Mean	1.8	0	0.8	0.8	35.7	
Overall Mean	2.1	0.4	2.3	2.3	156,823	
Score range	0 - 6	0 - 5	0 – n	0-6		

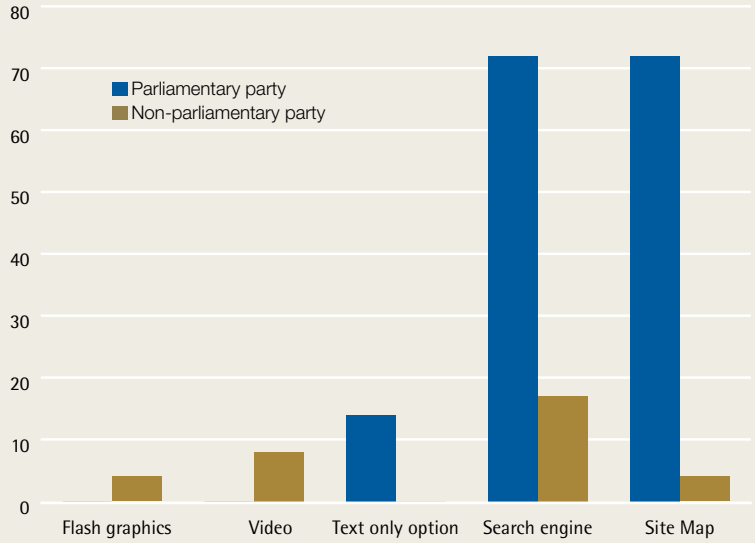
Source: Gibson and Ward 'Virtual campaigning'

* Data collected July 2005 using Google search engine

** Data collected by Ackland and Gibson July 2004

In addition to the content analysis of sites, Edwards also updated the 2000 party website analysis to include design and delivery features. Selected findings are reported in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Design and delivery features of party websites 2003



Source: Edwards *The Use of Internet Communication Technologies by Global Social Movements in Australia*

These findings show that while the major parties had moved away from offering glitzy sites, the fringe parties were actually become slightly better performers in this regard, although clearly none was particularly active in using the multimedia features of the web. When it comes to features promoting site accessibility, however, the established parties appear to still have a strong advantage, being much more likely to offer search facilities and site maps.

In addition, it is also useful to look at other more objective measures of prominence. One obvious means to assess the relative visibility of the party sites is by calculating the number of links into the party sites according to Google and also recording the number of outbound hyperlinks made by the parties themselves.

These figures are reported in the final two columns of Table 6 and show that again while the minor parliamentary parties are as well or even better connected than the two major parties, the fringe parties are very much less visible to the average internet user. While the parliamentary parties have an average of a quarter of a million sites linking to them on the web, the non-parliamentary parties only have about 35 links. In terms of linking outward, while the major parties are among

the most likely to make connections to other sites through their homepages, it appears that this tendency is most pronounced among parties on the left. The ALP, along with the Greens and the Communist Party of Australia, emerge as the most enthusiastic in terms of offering hyperlinks from their websites.

In addition to using online data to assess the extent to which the new media may be affecting parties' role as articulators of interests, it is also important to examine data relating to changes in their prominence in the offline environment. Have certain parties, and particularly the smaller ones, developed a stronger public profile during the period in which their use of new ICTs has increased? To examine this question we use the Lexis Nexis database of Asia/Pacific newspapers to search several key Australian and regional news sources across two time periods for references to selected parties. The time periods used were one week in 8-14 July 1995 and again in 2005, i.e. a time when internet use was limited among the parties and the public, and a later time when it had become a mass medium.

Attention focused on four parties in this section of the analysis: the two major parties—the ALP and the Liberal Party, and two minor parties—the Democrats and the Greens. The same search terms were used in each time period. Where the party name was non-unique, i.e., the Liberal Party, references were checked to ensure it was the Australian organisation that was being reported on. Otherwise the terms 'ALP', 'Australian Greens' and 'Australian Democrats' were used.[29] The results regarding the level of mainstream news attention to the major and minor parties is reported in Table 7.

Table 7: Mainstream news coverage of Australian parties in 1995 and 2005

	No. of articles		Change over time
Party	**1995**	**2005**	
ALP	191	150	- 21.5%
Liberal Party	69	72	+ 4%
Australian Democrats	26	33	+ 27%
Australian Greens	6	21	+ 350%
Mean	73	69	

Source: Lexis Nexis Executive www.lexisnexis.com Asia/Pacific news sources

[29] It is acknowledged that this approach may have reduced the total number of references reported for the minor parties since some stories may have referred simply to them without the 'Australian' prefix. In addition, the Liberal Party is often referred to as the Liberals or the Coalition, which may also mean the overall number of references to them is reduced in the dataset. However, given that our focus is on comparing the change in the extent of news coverage given to each the parties over time (rather than the absolute amount), these numbers are considered to provide valid data.

This table interestingly shows a distinct increase in the amount of mainstream news coverage achieved by the minor parties across the ten year period, along with no change and even a fall in the attention paid to the major parties.

Thus, although the major parties have continued to dominate news coverage since ICTs have been more widely used, it is certainly clear that they have to work harder to gain centre stage. The Greens, in particular, have secured an enhanced media profile. Of course it is acknowledged that such results cannot prove any direct or causal role for the new media in generating these shifts in mainstream news attention. However, on the basis of these results, the possibility of such effects cannot be entirely dismissed, particularly given the much stronger presence of the Greens online compared with other smaller parties. Certainly had the results shown a continuation or strengthening of the relative prominence of the two major parties over the time period the claims for any internet effects would have become implausible. Thus, while it would seem that new ICTs are not necessarily leading to a range of new organisational voices entering the party system, it may be that they are readjusting the volume levels of those already present.

Thus, overall it would seem that ICTs are providing a basis for an increase in the parties' role as articulators of interests, although this is not happening through wholly new organisations emerging in the system. The Greens in particular stand out as highly effective users of the web, if one considers connection with an audience and the wider web world. Green supporters are online in large numbers and also visiting the party site. The Greens website also draws in a comparatively large amount of web traffic through its links to other sites. While such activity may bring an increased profile for the party as a whole, the move toward this more individualised message delivery and direct relationship with voters of course brings with it the prospect of greater conflicting voices and fragmenting of party message. We return to this point in the summary and conclusion.

Aggregation

In the face of these trends in articulation, what can be said about the extent to which the new media are affecting parties' capacity for interest aggregation in Australian politics? As well as promoting the possibility for more individualised communication by party actors, can ICTs provide new channels by which parties can ensure that a better aggregation of demands can take place?

Addressing such questions means that we move away from our focus on the party organisation and party in the electorate, and look more at parties in their institutional setting; that is, within parliaments and also government itself.

Given that further chapters of this report deal with the role of representative structures in the information age in much greater depth, we touch only briefly on such developments here. In order to start to examine this question, however, it is necessary first to identify how ICTs might be harnessed by parties to help them in their aggregative role. What activities could they undertake or promote online that would help to foster the type of dialogue and discussion between groups and individuals that would lead to a genuine consensus-building in society?

While not an exhaustive list, some initiatives that could help to fulfil these goals include:

- The promotion of e-consultation events between key stakeholders on matters of significant public policy;
- Party members on legislative committees could establish e-forums whereby submissions could be made and matters discussed within a secure and moderated environment;
- More ambitiously, now that broadband access is expanding across the country, parties could host e-conferences or forums on various topics of national interest that would bring together interested individuals and organisations to present discussion papers and exchange views. Dialogue forums could be instituted whereby input from interested parties could be collated and used to feed into actual policy development within the party, and government more broadly; and
- On a more limited scale, parties could also offer moderated online debate forums on their own sites or within the party whereby views could be debated. Of course, the key here would be for the parties to ensure that constructive debate took place and that such features did not become venues for 'flaming' or verbal abuse – developments that are actually more likely to undermine than foster consensus building.

In terms of party initiatives in this area, however, it seems that it is not a particularly active focus of development. Certainly at the federal level it does not appear that there has been a concerted push by any of the parties as a whole to develop

new parliamentary or governmental structures to generate dialogue with the public or key interest groups, such as business, unions or non-government organisations (NGOs).

Green parliamentarians and their staff were active in pushing parliament to open up and put more information about its workings on the web. At the State level, parties report a few very active individual representatives that have pursued interactive, consultative opportunities with voters via the web. Victor Perton, the Victorian Liberal MP (retiring in 2006), is one obvious innovator, his site offering forums for debate to registered users.

Conclusion

Overall, ICTs have primarily become a means for parties to carry out their informing and educational role. They are utilised in a largely static manner as a tool for downward rather than interactive communication of a participatory or mobilising nature. In addition, while the websites provide a broad 'open all hours' shopfront to the interested user and an archive of information, this section has revealed that parties have an increasingly specialised audience and purpose in mind in using the Web and e-mail—to reach their members and activists. Given that this group is clearly already more active and participatory than most of the population, such findings do not appear to bode well for the audit values of equality of influence and citizen control of government.

However, while it may be the case that no radical or even moderate redistribution of power is taking place between individuals in society as a result of the arrival of the internet, this analysis has shown that such shifts may be taking place at the organisational level. While there does not appear to be a dramatic upsurge in the number of new parties formed since new ICTs became more widely used, the internet does appear to have offered some of the smaller parties an alternative means to reach their supporters and publicise themselves. Moreover, there is some evidence from the 'real world' that they are succeeding on both counts.

Rather than offering a direct means to secure greater equality of influence and control of government, therefore, it would appear that new ICTs work in a more indirect way, offering an organisational building capacity to smaller parties that shores up their position in the system as a whole. The extent to which the party guides this development from a 'whole-of-organisation' perspective, however, will be a crucial factor in determining whether parties can continue to use the medium

effectively. Or to put it another way, articulation of interests by individuals and local groups or factions within the party may increase while collective expressions of the parties' viewpoint may get lost in the process. Any developments along these lines would represent a significant loss for the current system of parliamentary rule. Strong mass-based parties underpin the model of democratic governance that currently exists in Australia, providing the 'people power' to counter-balance the narrow interests of commerce and specialist interest groups. A weakening of this traditional role without any corresponding shift in the system of representation and parliamentary democracy could lead to fragmentation and disaggregation of the polity.

What this chapter of the audit has shown is that currently there is at least the potential for these trends to gather momentum. Parties need to work hard, therefore, to ensure that they maintain a collectivist approach to message formation and delivery when making use of the new media technologies given the decentralist tendencies of the medium, tempting as it may be for the smaller players to try to put as many 'voices' out there as possible.

While such an approach might seem to run somewhat counter to the promotion of rights and liberties that forms a third main value within this audit, or the promotion of inclusive deliberation that forms its fourth, one can argue that parties, in their essence, function through organisational logic, and one that promotes the individual through collective action. Finding an appropriate balance between the internal devolution of power that is allowed by ICTs and the consolidation behind a national message may prove to be one of the key democratic challenges facing Australian parties as they move further into the digital age.

Strengths

- Australian political parties were among the earliest adopters of the new technology in the shape of website establishment.
- No obvious gap has emerged between the major and minor parliamentary parties, at least in terms of their website production or use of internal discussion networks.
- Parties are conscious of the need not to move faster than their supporters are ready for with regard to communication via new ICTs. Caution is not necessarily apathy or inertia.

Weaknesses

- Parties are not embracing innovative participatory elements of the new media but focusing largely on websites as static information repositories.
- More creative or interactive uses of the new ICTs focus more on internal elite communication rather than debate with the wider membership or informed public.
- Parties do not appear to have developed an integrated or coherent strategy with regard to the organisational use of new ICTs, with use among individual candidates and representatives as well as local parties highly patchy.
- Parties and the electorate in general appear to have plateaued between 2001 and 2004 in terms of interest in e-campaigning with the numbers of candidates online remaining stable, and no obvious growth in levels of voter interest in the sites.

Political representatives and new technology

Despite the increasing tendency for major parties to generate policy at executive levels, the role of MPs and local government Councillors remains an important part of the democratic system.

The role of MPs and other elected representatives is not definitively agreed in Australian political life; the role of elected representatives may be seen as:

- representing parties and voting in accordance with direction from party managers (e.g. parliamentary whips or local officials);
- serving as a pool from which talent can be drawn to fill management positions in parliament or Cabinet;
- acting as autonomous actors between elections, following their personal views and opinions on policies to be evaluated only at the next election;
- mediating public and party opinion, forming a conduit between the formal policy systems of the parliament/council, party, and the community or electorate; or
- forming direct conduits of local views to the party and parliament, serving as advocates of local concerns or weathervanes of public opinion.

Overall, the specific individual views of elected representatives as to their function is generally determined by three factors: the structure and culture of their party and/or factional position, their level of security of tenure (which can encourage greater autonomy from the party if the individual considers their position highly secure, or inversely highly susceptible), and the personal outlook or philosophy of the individual as to their role in the democratic system.

In addition, it must be recognised that Councillors and MPs have limited staff and financial resources, and therefore their level of use of new technology tends to be heavily influenced by either their own personal interest and experience with technology, or the skill levels of staff and volunteers that support their work. Thus, in research undertaken in 2002 into the adoption of new communications technologies by elected representatives around Australia, the combination of office resources and individual skill levels was identified as being highly influential on their use of new technology in general terms.[30]

In considering the use of ICTs by elected representatives in democratic terms, therefore, the core questions under consideration are:

- To what extent are elected representatives utilising ICTs?
- Does the use of these technologies increase or undermine the level of democratic participation by members of the community, and/or support the work of elected representatives in their role as policy makers?

Representatives' use of new technology

Given their roles it is unsurprising that elected representatives in Australia are more likely than the rest of the community to use new technology for communication and information gathering. Australia's political representatives are highly 'wired' with regards to the use of technologies like the World Wide Web and e-mail.

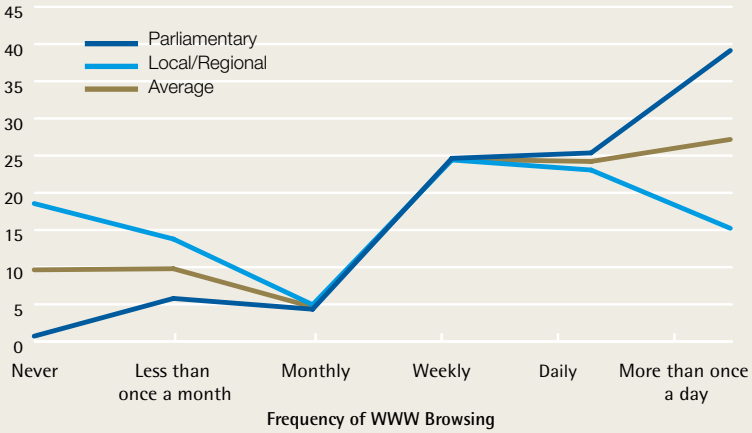
As illustrated in Figures 4 and 5 below, elected representatives, and particularly those who receive electorate offices as part of their employment package, are far above the average Australian citizen in their use of internet-based technologies.

This is particularly true of the quintessential communications tool of the digital age: e-mail: the implications of this, in terms of democratic outcomes, are difficult to quantify specifically, however it is possible to state that:

- Elected representatives in Australia can be considered to be technologically aware and active, and thus their understanding of the capacity and utility of these technologies should not be understated, and
- As active users of these technologies, these individuals have greater capacity to gather and synthesise information relevant to their political function, and sit within the reach of Australians who utilise technologies like e-mail on a regular basis.

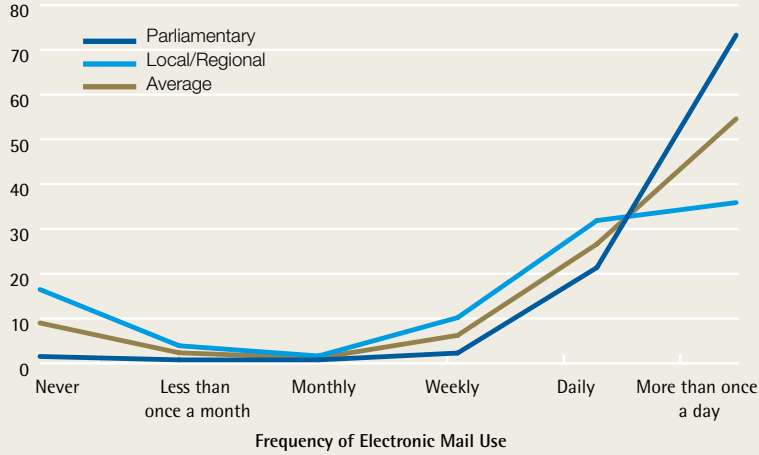
[30] Peter Chen, 2002, *Australian Elected Representatives' Use of New Media Technologies*, Research Monograph, Centre for Public Policy, University of Melbourne

Figure 4: Elected representatives and the web



Source: Chen, *Australian Elected Representatives' Use of New Media Technologies*

Figure 5: Elected representatives and e-mail



Source: Chen, Australian Elected Representatives' Use of New Media Technologies

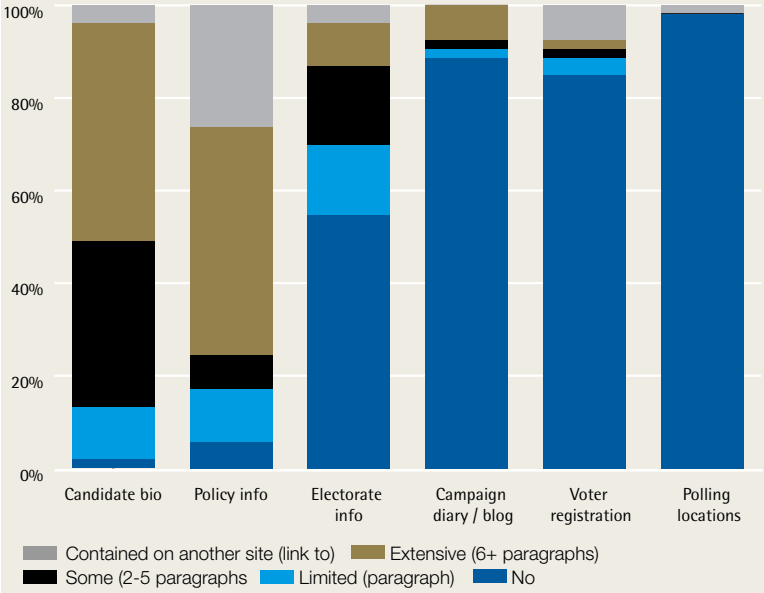
Elected representatives as content creators

While the use of ICTs by elected representatives is a positive development, it is important to delineate between relatively passive use of technology, and the potential for elected representatives to be active in the production and distribution of new information relevant to their political function.

Thus, we need to examine how far individual candidates and MPs from a range of parties are making use of new technology as the instigators of content creation. ICTs, and particularly the web, offer an alternative and independent platform for party representatives to send their own messages out to the public and engage in a dialogue with those citizens they represent.

In content analysis undertaken on a sample of individual candidate sites from the five largest parties during the 2004 election (ALP, Liberals, Nationals, Greens, Democrats), we can see that these sites tended to focus on personal biographical

Figure 6: Content of candidate websites 2004[31]



Source: Chen, 'e-lection 2004?'

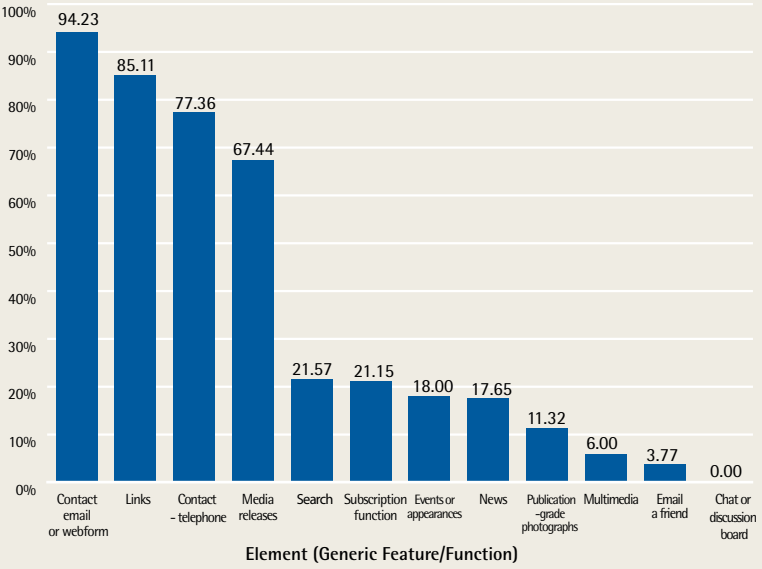
information and policy statements, with little supporting information about their electorate, how to vote, etc.

What should be noted, however, is that, while having highly variable quality and depth of content, these sites did not simply push messages, but also included greater means of accessing the candidate than the official party sites. Looking at the features or functionality of the websites evaluated, we can see that these sites heavily featured personal (one-to-one) methods of contacting the candidate, with e-mail and web-based forms favoured, even more than telephone contact.

[31] Based on a random sample of 53 websites.

This is rational and logical in that e-mail provided candidates with a better means to manage communications with constituents during the campaign, with many candidates responding to e-mails at times of the day (such as late in the evening

Figure 7: Features of candidate websites 2004



Source: Chen, 'e-lection 2004?'

and early in the morning) when they were not booked for other tasks, such as rallies or door knocking.

The above data deal largely with the question of how far candidate are using the technology to articulate their concerns and policies to the media and wider public during a defined period of the political cycle. What about after the election is over? How does the party in government operate? Are those candidates who are elected continuing to utilise the new media?

Evidence from a recent study of Australian MPs' use of the Web reveals an interesting similarity to the findings for candidates. Table 8 reports the proportion of MPs with their own website prior to the federal election in 2004. Just less than half of Labor and Liberal party members were found to operate personal sites, and well over two thirds of National MPs. The 'Other' category, consisting of Independents and the solitary Green member, while small in number, also reveals a proportionally high level of activity.

Table 8: Parties, states and website adoption			
		MPs with websites (%)	Difference from average (%)
Parties	Liberal	43	- 4
	ALP	45	- 2
	Nationals	69	+ 22
	Other	75	+ 28

Source: Rachel Gibson, Wainer Lusoli and Stephen Ward, 2004, 'Phile or phobe? Australian MPs and the new communications technology', Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, www.esri.salford.ac.uk/ESRCResearchproject/output.php

Such results suggest that representatives without a high-profile party affiliation are more eager to use the web to establish an identity for themselves. Those coming from the larger parties where more rigorous party discipline operates, however, appear to be less enthusiastic. This greater reticence among the major party members toward independent articulation via the web is confirmed by the discussion of content of sites by Gibson et al.,[32] which notes the adoption on the part of MPs of neat, functional sites which do the party the least possible damage.

A new relationship?

The passive and active use of ICTs by elected representatives shows that Australia's political class is not adverse to their use. The interactive aspects of ICTs also provide the possibility for MPs and local Councillors to form new and deeper relationships with their electorates over policy issues.

While MPs and Councillors have always used a variety of technologies to communicate with constituents, from informal walk-and-chats to the use of telephone and fax machines (and now e-mail), ICTs can transform this information gathering and socialisation activity from a one-to-one process to a one-to-many process through a variety of polling or consultation techniques, such as:

- The development of online discussion lists associated with MPs' websites;
- The use of voting mechanisms online to aggregate views and opinions; and
- Audio- and video-conferencing systems.

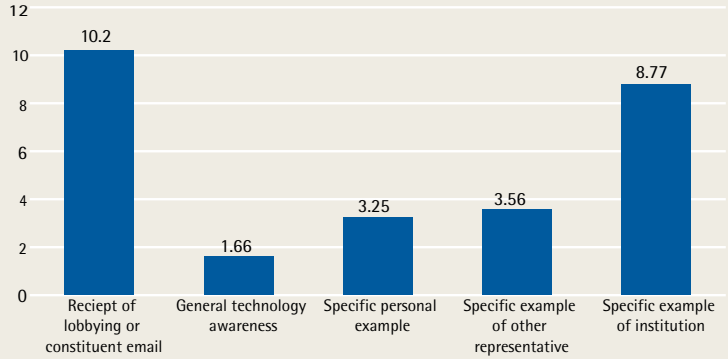
However, as was seen in Figure 7, the tendency for candidates and MPs to use

32 Gibson et al, 'Phile or phobe?'

these types of systems appears low. In addition, from data collected in 2002 on the use of online consultation techniques by serving elected representatives, we can see that the activity in this area has been very limited. Only a very small minority of elected representatives across Australia have engaged in online consultation, and very few exhibit an awareness of the possibilities of the use of ICTs for this purpose. This is illustrated in Figure 8, which reports on MPs' awareness of different forms of online consultation and their ability to cite personal examples (such as 'lobbying' email) or awareness of other forms of online consultation (such as online consultation undertaken by parliamentary or bureaucratic institutions).

In addition, it should be recognised that while candidates themselves are not being proactive in this area, they remain subject to proactive approaches from people in their community (and the wider political environment) through the receipt of e-mail on policy and political matters. Thus, the risk appears high that, rather than taking the initiative to form a new relationship with their stakeholder groups, elected representatives may retreat from engagement with the technology.

Figure 8: Online consultation and elected representatives



Source: Chen, *Australian Elected Representatives' Use of New Media Technologies*

This trend is starting to emerge, and can be seen on two fronts:

- The increased use of organisational filtering systems[33] to pre-filter e-mails to prevent MPs receiving mass e-mail postings. This technology is limited in its accuracy and can therefore unintentionally filter genuine messages; and
- The relatively underdeveloped internal processes in electorate offices for

[33] For example, the Parliament of Victoria recently adopted a general filtering service for all MPs following a number of cases of bulk e-mail. This problem has been noted around the world, and various jurisdictions have taken different approaches to it: from removing e-mail addresses from the web, to placing web-forms online that attempt to limit the capacity of 'spam robots' finding these addresses.

holding and replying to electronic mail. Thus, while most electorate offices maintain a clear system for recording and responding to physical mail, many MPs have limited or no systems to allow them to manage electronic communications in an efficient manner.

While capacity is one barrier to greater levels of interaction between elected representatives and the community, the ruthless logic of current party politics is also a significant barrier to the establishment of new forms of interaction between Members and their constituencies.

One apparently atypical (and yet ultimately typical) example is noted by Bishop,[34] who identified an online polling system used by the (then) Labor backbencher Mark Latham. Latham established a series of propositions on his personal website for members of his electorate to vote upon (approximately 1,000 signed up and about 250 voted per proposition). At first sight, this seems to show that some elected representatives are attempting to reconsider the way in which they stay engaged with their electorate over matters of public policy, but it should be noted that examples like this are particularly rare in Australian public life.

While many MPs and candidates include online polls on their websites, most of these tend to be restrained to 'safe' or loaded questions that could not be construed in any way to have a meaningful impact on policy outcomes. In the case of Latham's experiment with a new form of representative democracy, the immediate outcome was responses from his electorate that ran counter to formal Labor Party policy, and the online polling system was quickly abandoned.

This case example simply serves to highlight the tension between the representative function as embodying a conduit function, and the realities of party politics and the ruthlessness of party discipline in the current Australian political environment.

Conclusion

Overall, the use of ICTs by elected representatives in Australia reflects the modest application of technology by the parties they represent. While the role of parties in disciplining MPs and Councillors would suggest that elected representatives would shy away from these technologies, the limited uptake tends to reflect a combination of party logic and limitations on the resources available for individual representatives. This is played out in the case examples provided above, as is the tendency for State and local government representatives to lag behind their federal counterparts in the establishment and use of new media, both for interaction with individual constituencies and as a publishing vehicle.

[34] Patrick Bishop, 2002, *Democratic Equivocation: Who Wants What, When, and How?*, http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/pubs/pops/pop39/c03.pdf

The limited use of ICTs reflects the limited value of static online sources like websites in drawing voters to the representatives in question, but can also be attributed to the institutional framework in which MPs tend to operate. With some of their budget allocations aimed at specific forms of media such as printing and postal budgets there are clearly incentives towards use of these traditional forms of communication. In addition, given the busy work schedule of MPs, and the limited remuneration of local Councillors, there are restricted opportunities for elected representatives to develop literacy in new information technology once in office.

While most parliamentary Information Technology departments offer increasingly sophisticated hardware and software (such as modern, highly portable laptops with remote internet access), elected representatives tend not to develop new skills while in office. While the outlook for greater levels of online interactivity between office holders and the public remains limited, a generational change effect will occur over time, as younger, more IT-literate representatives enter the political stage, bringing skills and comfort in new media with them.

Strengths
• Political representatives in Australia readily employ new technology to distribute policy and political information. • Politicians are largely accessible via new technologies like e-mail. • Politicians are using new technologies to inform themselves and their decision-making activities.
Weaknesses
• Political representatives, like Australian political parties, have tended not to use their websites and other channels to engage the public in policy dialogues. • Political representatives suffer organisational and financial limits on their use of new media technologies, particularly because parliamentary allowances emphasise printing and postage.

Elections and ICTs

One of the most obvious places to examine the impact of ICTs on democratic practice is the electoral process itself. As the focus of political competition, the way in which ICTs have impacted on elections, both positively and negatively, is a good measure of the democratic value and influence of these technologies in Australia.

As communications tools, ICTs have clear applicability to political campaigns, providing alternative communications tools for the electorate to gather information relevant to casting an informed vote, but also as a means for parties and candidates to communicate within the campaign organisation itself. In addition, as an alternative 'space' which permits free communication and the aggregation of individuals, ICTs also have a potential role in creating new forms of political campaigning ('virtual campaigns') or means to overcome traditional barriers for organising support or alternatives to the entrenched parties.

In examining the role of ICTs in elections, it is therefore important to consider three likely areas of impact:

- The use of these technologies by pre-existing political actors as means of promoting political organisation;
- The use of ICTs by alternative actors—such as civil society or protest groups—to influence campaign outcomes; and
- The direct application of ICTs within the electoral process itself: electronic and online voting.

ICTs and the campaign

As indicated in the two previous chapters, the uptake of ICTs by political parties and sitting MPs has been dramatic over recent years. However, even for the major political parties—which have access to considerable resources to fight election campaigns from public and private financing and electoral office allocations—it must be recognised that the use of ICTs in electoral campaigns in Australia has been very modest over the past ten years. Thus, while the major parties initially saw the internet as a low-cost communication tool (and a way to ensure visibility as modern, technologically-sophisticated political organisations), the disappointing use of these sites by the public has reduced party interest in web-based information over the past ten years.

A good indication of this shift has been:

- The tendency for the number and frequency of improvements in the depth, design, and complexity of party websites to decline over the past five years;
- A decline in the use of campaign specific websites in recent years (reliance on the standard website system during the campaign);
- A decline in the use of customised, audience-specific websites during recent election campaigns (last seen in the 2001 federal election campaign[35]); and
- Limited use of 'new' technologies, such as mobile ICTs in doorknocking, or the development of sophisticated internal systems to manage candidates and volunteers, both of which have been a significant feature of election campaigns in the US in recent years.[36]

Use of ICTs in the campaigning process

This shift in focus is not surprising, nor does it present any particular democratic impacts upon the *status quo* (positively or negatively). Overall, the tendency for the major parties to focus on mainstream mass media, either through public relations or via paid advertising, reflects the difference between new and old media forms: namely that new media tend to be 'pull media' which require the audience to actively seek out information, whereas broadcast media (television, radio) are a form of 'push' media form, able to deliver campaign messages broadly and to that large proportion of the population.

[35] The 'Political Big Brother' website of the ALP, which was modelled on the popular television program of a similar name and targeted towards younger voters.

[36] For example, in the 2004 US Presidential election, the group ACT for America fielded door-to-door canvassers armed with Palm Pilot personal digital assistants which were used to collect database information and show citizens short promotional videos supporting the Democrat challenger.

As discussed in the sections above, 'pull' media have limited value in reaching undecided and disinterested voters who are conventionally seen by parties as being core to electoral success, due to their lower levels of party identification and therefore higher tendency to 'swing'. Party websites, therefore, tend to be mainly provided for the party faithful, or as sources of press releases and contact information for mainstream journalists.

In addition, where 'push' elements of new media are available (such as e-mail or instant messaging), parties have been cautious in using these channels extensively, due to both strong community distaste for 'spam' (unsolicited bulk e-mail), and also limitations in developing the types of extensive coverage available from broadcast media and the lack of individual contact information available for online communications (e.g. limited numbers of valid e-mail addresses stored in party databases).

The one significant exception to this general rule has been the use of recorded 'advocacy calls' (automated telephone dialling systems) by the Liberal Party in the 2004 federal election campaign to target some electorates with mass telephone messages. While the Liberals claimed this approach was effective, its utility is difficult to assess. The party has said it will be reused in the future, so it is one emerging area of political campaigning that will deserve additional attention. This is not simply because of its possible utility in mobilising voter support, but also because of the tendency for this high-cost communications method to be dominated by the entrenched major parties.

Overall, political parties and candidates tend to use ICTs in a limited number of ways:

- The establishment (or maintenance) of websites during the campaign;
- The use of the internet as an updated archive of information generated during the campaign including press releases, advertisement videos and radio spots;[37]
- Provision of online contact information, such as e-mail contacts;
- The limited use of interactive website elements such as debt or tax-cut calculators; and
- As 'back end' organisational support tools, largely based around desktop publishing, internal communications with the central party campaign management team, and the use of the respective party database systems.

[37] |Whether they were actually aired or not. During the 2004 federal election campaign, the Democrats and Greens provided online advertisements that were not aired on television, presumably because of the cost.

It should be noted that the Victorian Electoral Commission has historically published candidate statements online for local government elections, where the ballot was being conducted by electronic mail. This practice was discontinued in 2004 following legal advice received by the organisation. It appears, at the point of writing, that the State government will introduce new legislation to ensure the practice is reinstated and possibly expanded to all local government elections, and even State government elections as well.

The democratic impact of this is hard to measure, but, in the contested space of local government elections, the online publication of these statements will provide greater exposure for the candidates, both to electors and the media.[38]

Levelling the playing field?

An important democratic question is the extent to which ICTs lower the barriers to participation in the political process by groups outside the major political parties. As with alternative and community media online, we can hypothesise that the low barriers to participation in online publishing should have beneficial outcomes in terms of democratic competition.

Yet as indicated in the two sections above, the low level of public interest in partisan websites tends to undermine this hypothesis and any attempt to compare mainstream and non-mainstream political actors' use of new media may lead to deceptive conclusions.

Take Table 9, for example, drawn from an analysis of the 2004 federal election. In this table we can see that:

- The use of new media technologies (websites and e-mail addresses) is higher for the two major parties; and
- The minor parties (in and outside of government) have lower use of these two technologies overall.

This finding is problematic, however, in terms of a descriptive presentation of the respective communications tools used by political candidates, and reflects:

- The different resources available to insider groups (the ALP, the Liberals) versus the 'parties of perpetual opposition'; and
- The limited value of these channels in the electoral process, where media tends to be saturated with coverage of the election, albeit disproportionately slanted towards the major parties.

[38] This has created tensions, however, with the VEC expressing concerns about whether the need to vet these statements will impair their role as non-partisan administrators of the electoral process. In 2005, the VEC released new rules regarding the content of local government candidate statements that attracted considerable criticisms because of the strict nature of the provisions included.

The finding, therefore, does not necessarily indicate a negative view of the health of the Australian democratic system overall. The lower use of ICTs by minor parties reflects, but does not significantly feed into, the ongoing disparity of access to media and public campaign funds that minor parties have faced for decades.

Table 9: Candidates' use of new media channels, 2004 federal election

Party	House	Percentage	
		Candidates with E-mail addresses	Candidates with unique websites
Australian Democrats	Senate	100%	16.66%
	Representatives	58.82%	0%
	Total:	64.17%	2.5%
Australian Greens	Senate	58.82%	0.00%
	Representatives	100.00%	8.1%
	Total:	100.00%	8.97%
Australian Labor Party	Senate	72%	20%
	Representatives	96.67%	30.00%
	Total:	93.14%	28.57%
Liberal Party of Australia	Senate	100%	16%
	Representatives	98.45%	44.18%
	Total:	98.70%	39.61%
Nationals	Senate	0%	0%
	Representatives	100.00%	33.33%
	Total:	78.26%	26.08%

Source: Chen, 'e-lection 2004?'

Given this more general exclusion from the mainstream media during elections—the place where parties appear to agree electoral victory is won or lost—it is not surprising that minor parties like the Australian Greens and the Democrats are far more likely to:

- Send party e-mail updates during the election campaign than the major parties;
- Respond to personal e-mail inquiries than major party candidates; and
- Make a disproportionately high investment in the development of online resources.

This last point reflects the relatively low cost of online content production compared with the extraordinarily high costs of purchasing commercial airtime during an election. This point, however, is not related to ICTs specifically, being more symptomatic of a deeper cause.

On the positive side this means that ICTs have fostered a new channel by which these parties can communicate with the public—cutting through a mass media environment that tends to be saturated with mainstream parties and personalities during the campaign (both in terms of the amount of media coverage afforded as journalism, or in terms of the massive advertising spending of the major parties).

Internal use of ICTs in electoral competition

However, we also need to note that the use of ICTs as a public (and visible) communication channel is only part of their value to the democratic process. As discussed in the first section, the major parties' significant electoral advantage lies not only with the largesse they can bring to bear for advertising expenditure, but also in their networked electoral database systems.

These systems—supported by party funding and continually added to by local members' staffers—provide a significant electoral advantage through the ability to:

- Supplement general market research with specific information on the views and preferences of electorates and suburbs;
- Target the use of direct mail, advocacy calls and door-knocking; and
- Provide the party with information that is added to and develops over time.

Thus, while the appearance of minor party websites, and their increasingly deep and rich content provision is encouraging, the use of ICTs in electoral campaigning is a moving target, and one where the resources of the minor parties are insufficient to match that of the major parties, particularly for the 'invisible' political activities of target marketing and the market analysis and segmentation process.

Undermining the positive view afforded of the use of web-based communications channels by the minor parties is the finding presented in Table 10, which shows that the major parties have a significantly higher use of their electoral database system than the minor parties. As the use of these systems is essential to maintaining and updating information, the high rate of use by the major parties means that not only do they gain strategic advantage in an election, but by continuously updating and capturing new information, they are also better placed in subsequent elections.

Table 10: 'Backend' ICTs use by candidates [39]	
Party	**Per Cent**
Democrats	27.27
Greens	15.00
ALP	88.24
Coalition	72.73
Average	38.89

Source: Chen, 'e-lection 2004?'

While this analysis could lead to a relatively cynical view of the capacity of the major parties to dominate the communications landscape, it should be recognised that the majors still have a considerable way to go in developing online communications channels to support their candidates. Thus, while most of the ALP or Liberal candidates' websites in the 2004 election displayed a certain sameness with regards to core messages and policy information (reflecting the tendency towards centrally-managed campaigning with tight information management and release processes), the fact that candidate websites existed at all is relatively surprising in the age of professional campaigning.

The level of freedom that individual candidates had enjoyed in developing their own websites, the information they placed on these sites, and the wide variety of styles and designs (for good or ill), demonstrate that this remains an area of the mainstream parties that has evaded (so far) the grasp of the campaign management 'machine men'. Candidates commonly received little in the way of easy-to-use templates for the production of brochures in the 2004 campaign (the Australian Greens being at the forefront of the use of brochure templates), and individual candidates often received little in the way of electronic resources to support their campaign operations.

Thus, one of the future directions of the use of ICTs by parties in the election campaign is likely to be the greater use of 'controlled layout and design' techniques to ensure that individual candidates' brochures and websites (if they are allowed to have them at all) share consistent branding and not just consistent messages. This will invariably have two impacts on future elections:

- The information provided by local candidates will be increasingly professional in its graphic design and message presentation; and
- The level of local content produced for print or online communications will likely decline and be replaced with centrally managed messages from the party machines.

[39] Data drawn from a content analysis of message content undertaken November 2003.

The extent to which the last outcome will occur, however, will depend on the internal organisation and structure of the individual parties, and the relative freedom of action of individual candidates. In parties, like the ALP, with strict enforcement of discipline through the formalised faction system, higher levels of content management can be expected.

Alternative voices online

Political parties and candidates are not, however, the only relevant sources of political information between and during election campaigns. While the rise of alternative news and political websites is discussed in the chapter on civil society, some relevant points regarding these types of communications channels should be made with regards to their role in modern election campaigns in Australia.

During the past decade, the popularity of the web has seen the growth of independent online publications across a range of areas. In addition, the interactive and communication capabilities of ICTs have seen new forms of social and political interaction, including:

- Static websites similar to newspapers;
- Alternative Web publications, like daily comment journals ('blogs');
- Discussion lists and bulletin board systems;
- Virtual communities; and
- Online voting and polling systems.

By nature, many of these new communications tools have relevance during election campaigns, either as specific vehicles for the promotion of a particular policy issue, as a source of alternative news reporting or commentary. They can also function as 'public spheres' for community discussion and debate, or as a means for members of the community to discuss (and occasionally ridicule) mainstream political actors. In recent elections in Australia, each of these forms of political activity has been observed, and the number of specific and general-purpose political websites has increased over the years.

Sites of public debate and socialisation

One of the first political applications of ICTs has been to extend offline political debate—the type of debate currently seen at the dinner table, or in pubs and clubs—online. While discussions of ICTs tend to focus on web-enabled

applications, electronic mail and the capacity to develop lists of participants engaged in e-mail discussions as a group (such as Listserv, Usenet, or online 'groups') provide an excellent way for interested members of any community, political or other, to come together to talk about issues. Because e-mail tends to be asynchronous, i.e. the conversation does not take place in real time, these conversations can be ongoing or even unending. This allows for participation of people who may have significant barriers to participating in physical events, like party or public meetings.

This process, political socialisation, has been studied in and out of the context of Australian political campaigns. This research has tended to focus on:

- To what extent Australians engage in these 'virtual public spheres'—how popular are they?
- What is the quality of debate—is it informative or does it simply reinforce prejudices or specific partisan points of view?
- Does online discussion lead to significant offline action—does it motivate people to participate in political affairs more broadly?

In taking data from three popular online political discussion lists (Australian Politics, On Line Opinion, and Political Lobby), the first observation is that these lists tend to have small numbers of participants, commonly fewer than 200 subscribers, with far fewer numbers of active participants in the debate and discussion on list. These modest levels of participation can be read to indicate a limited impact of these forms of online association on the political behaviour of individuals. However, it must be recognised that in a global medium like the Internet, there is a tendency for audiences to fragment substantially, and so the actual number of active participants in the online political discussion is likely to be significantly higher. In addition, the tendency for online discussion lists to have large numbers of non-active members ('lurkers') has been noted in a variety of e-mail discussion lists, and therefore is not unique to the political arena.

As spaces for political socialisation however, we can see that these types of discussion lists provide a very positive democratic impact on the political awareness and knowledge of participants. As Table 11 below illustrates, the lists tend to be largely focused on debate and discussion, rather than places where people organise specific political action or activity. Thus, online electronic discussion lists serve as a means by which citizens can inform themselves prior and during the local process, but may not be recognised as sources of potential activism.

Table 11: Communication types in online political discussion lists [40]			
Message content	Australian Politics	On Line Opinion	Political Lobby
Contains question(s)	17.64%	22.36%	20.87%
Conveys information on subject	79.41%	77.97%	80.68%
Makes reference to authority source	19.60%	47.29%	37.69%
Substantiation of Authority Source	17.44%	36.89%	9.8%
"Call to arms" – invites action	9.80%	0.74%	6.54%
Recruitment message	9.80%	0.54%	2.18%

Source: Chen, 'A comparative analysis of political email lists'

One of the core reasons why these lists are forums for debate, rather than action or mobilisation comes from their diversity. While there are concerns that audience fragmentation in the new media environment may lead to an insular form of political association, research conducted on these three e-mail lists clearly shows genuine interaction between people with a diversity of views and opinions (Table 12, below). This finding counters the concern that internet 'ghettos' may emerge which create further divisions within the community.

This diversity is also seen in the temporally-specific electoral discussion lists that have emerged during formal campaign periods. For example, the www.marklathamsucks.com website established during the 2004 federal election attracted far ranging political debate from both sites of the political spectrum, and attracted considerable levels of active participation in policy debate, if little media coverage of this vibrant online community (see below).

Table 12: Diversity in online political discussion lists [41]			
Ideological position of author	Australian Politics	On Line Opinion	Political Lobby
Left	0%	47.63%	33.32%
Centre	10.94%	17.42%	0%
Right	29.77%	22.22%	33.32%
Post-materialist	0%	0%	0%
Feminist	0%	0%	0%
Ecologist	0%	0%	0%
Nationalist	29.77%	0%	16.68%
Other	29.77%	12.73%	16.68%

Source: Chen, 'A comparative analysis of political email lists'

[40] Data drawn from a content analysis of message content undertaken November 2003.

[41] Data drawn from a content analysis of message content undertaken November 2003.

However, analysis of these three lists suggests that their members tend towards a particular type of person who participates in a range of social activities, clubs, or groups and who may or may not represent the political mainstream.

These low levels of participation may be seen as disappointing in terms of the hope for a democratic renewal of public discussion of political and policy matters. Whilst the absolute numbers of participants may be small, however, those who engage in online political debate tend to be 'joiners' and have a wider impact on public opinion through their own social networks.

Alternative political websites

In addition to online discussion and debate, recent election campaigns have seen increasing numbers of non-party websites established with the intention of having some impact on the election outcome. Given the nature of online publication, these websites tend to be incredibly diverse in their content, objectives, and the organisations or individuals responsible for their production. While many were very serious attempts to focus debate on specific policy issues, and represented the campaign commitments of established non-party organisations, others were generated by new or 'virtual' organisations, and many were produced by individuals.

Some examples from the 2004 national election include:

- domeaus.com – An online voting website allowing *candidates* to vote on issues in an 'issue marketplace'. This site allowed viewers to see candidates' opinions on a range of policy issues (not simply the limited number focused upon by the mainstream media);
- www.electiontracker.net—Established by a non-profit organisation, vibewire.net, this site provided alternative journalistic coverage of the election from a youth perspective, using young people as reporters, writers, and editors;
- www.comparepolicies.com.au—Established by Brisbane-based design firm Amok Creative, this site provided comparative policy information with a user-friendly search engine;
- www.timetogojohn.com—Promotional website of a video 'Time to Go John', an anti-Howard 90 minute compilation of short documentaries, animations and political satires;
- voteenvironment.com.au—The Wilderness Society's campaign website for the election, promoting the organisation's policy objectives and voting preferences; and

- www.johnnybackflip.com—A parody site selling 'educational toys' such as the floating bath toy *Johnny Overboard*.

As you can see from this list, the range of different sites is quite dramatic, and it is difficult to determine accurately the level of impact that the sites have had during the election campaign. However, to provide some estimation of their democratic value, three types of assessment will be used:

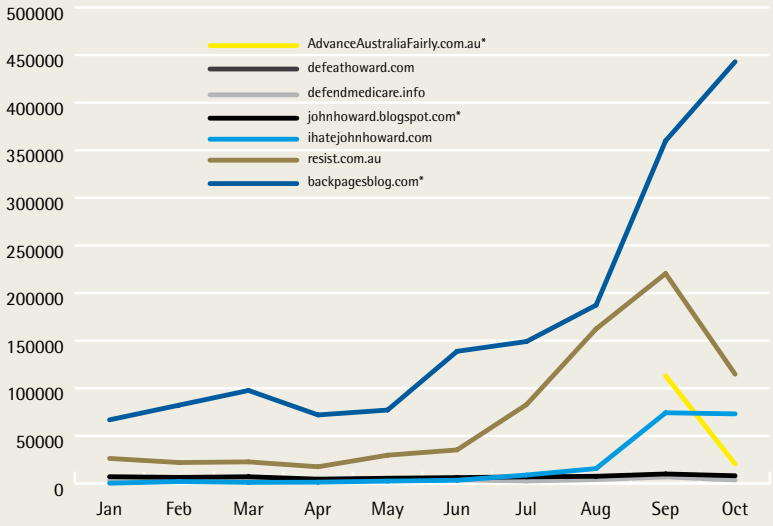
- To what extent do these sites attract visitors?
- To what extent do these sites attract participation from candidates in the election?
- Do these websites receive attention from mainstream media?

Turning to the first question, we can see that the popularity of these websites is quite diverse. While there are significant limitations to using website metrics to assess the number of people who have visited individual websites, Figure 9 illustrates that there were some websites that gained significant online traffic during the 2004 campaign, while others received little, if any, patronage. Overall, the sites that attracted attention tended to be those that:

- Pre-dated the election campaign, and therefore had a readership developed over time. These sites had a clear advantage over election-specific sites, in that they did not have to launch and promote their activities during a period of media saturation; or
- Sites that, for whatever reason, tended to attract mainstream media attention.

Overall, however, the tendency for some of these alternative voices to receive significant readership levels during the electoral process provides a positive view of the democratic value of the open publishing environment of the internet.

Figure 9: Popularity of alternative political websites – 2004 federal election



* Approximate figures only

Source: Compiled from personal correspondence; 10/11/04 (multiple sources; October figure truncated to partial month only in some cases)

If alternative media gained some traction during the electoral campaign, it may be reasonable to expect that parties or candidates have recognised that these alternative channels of information may be relevant to the campaign process. However, as with the political parties, it appears that candidates are risk-averse in participating in online debates organised by non-mainstream news organisations. Looking at one of the more interesting websites established in the lead up to the 2004 federal election – the Dome of Conscience – we can see that participation in these types of online forums by the major parties was low.

As illustrated in Table 13, the Dome of Conscience, a site which allowed candidates to express their personal policy views through a succession of identifiable votes, received some participation from the Opposition and the minor parties (mostly from the Greens and Democrats), but with such small levels of participation, was undermined in its desire to provide a greater level of localised information on candidate positions. This demonstrates again how the major parties—focused on mass media strategies—see limited value in the online environment as a campaign channel.

Table 13: Candidate participation in the "Dome of Conscience"	
Party	**Participants**
No GST	1
Socialist Alliance	1
The Great Australians	1
Christian Democrats	2
Family First	2
One Nation	3
The Progressives Alliance	4
Australian Labor Party	8
Independent	17
Citizens Electoral Council	20
Greens	37
Democrats	50
Total	**146**

Source: http://bigpulse.com/whosvoting.php?sid=RGuzv2cWJN8IHCZ

Similarly, the mainstream media appeared remiss in their treatment of alternative political websites during the campaign. While some sites did attract media attention, this was generally limited to those sites that were parodies (attracting 'odd spot' coverage in some papers) and those high-profile bloggers (such as Christopher Sheil's 'Backpages blog') that could be incorporated into the mainstream media because of an affinity with the writing style and approach of commercial journalists. Interesting alternative views, such as the youth site 'Election Tracker' received virtually no media coverage,[42] despite the fact that its analysis was of significant interest to a traditionally under-represented community segment.

Media coverage of alternative news websites during and prior to the election campaign was essential to their success, and this scarcity of coverage significantly limited the impact of these channels on political debate. The mainstream media, well contained in the carefully-orchestrated campaign travel processes of bus trips and 'on call' events, could have recognised an alternative point of access to political analysis, but largely failed to do so. In this way, it appears that the traditional media have accepted that managed media campaigning processes represent the extent of the modern election process.

[42] Apart from ABC radio.

Regulation of alternative websites since the 2004 election

While it is clear that non-party partisan websites have relatively low general readership during the election campaign, their appearance has not gone unnoticed by the mainstream political parties. Following the 2004 election, the Special Minister for State, Senator Eric Abetz, called upon the AEC to investigate if the satirical website 'Liars for Howard' had breached Australian electoral laws by publishing electoral information without full disclosure of the site's owners or publishers.

This issue, and concerns about a number of other websites during the election, exposes some of the problems with information published online. There is a particular problem with slanderous or untrue material published on computers outside of the legal jurisdiction of the Australian online content regulators (the Australian Communications and Media Authority). There were similar problems with 'named' sites, for example the publication of material (falsely) accusing a candidate of anti-Semitism by the online news site Crikey! In this case, a retraction was published, but the possibility for co-ordinated (or even ad hoc) character assassinations to be undertaken using ICTs is very real.

While this form of deceptive conduct is not new to Australian politics, and represents an online version of what is traditionally referred to as a 'shit sheet' (a photocopied anonymous flyer), the reach of this material and its ability to be quickly reproduced online in a variety of blogs, amateur websites, and e-mails, adds complexity to the online campaign environment. While there is no evidence that political parties have been tapping into this form of illicit campaigning, shit sheets have traditionally been employed by members of political parties, sometimes to great effect. There is no reason, therefore, to imagine that parties will not adopt this innovation at some point in the future.

Electronic and online voting in Australia

At present most elections in Australia are assisted through the use of computers, whether hand-written votes are manually 'keyed' into a computer for automatic processing and tabulation, or whether the internet is used to display election night results in 'real time'.

While this activity has benefits in assisting the administration of the electoral process (and some recommendations are being considered around Australia to add automatic scanning of paper ballots to assist in electoral administration),

one specific area of ICT application during the formal electoral process is the use of computers or similar technologies to record and count votes. The proposed advantages of these systems are:

- Computers are good at calculation, particularly complex calculations (e.g. preference allocation);
- The entry of votes into a computer reduces the processing costs of manual keying;
- Recounts and the display of running totals can be undertaken very easily and quickly;
- Where internet (or similar) technologies are introduced, this can allow people to vote remotely—a benefit for people with limited mobility, carer or other responsibilities, or who are away from their jurisdiction or out of the country.

A brief technological overview

Electronic and online voting is not one single technology, but a range of technologies that could be used for voting purposes. Outside the formal electoral process, electronic voting can be seen in areas as diverse as:

- The use of SMS messages to vote in competitions or 'reality television' programming;
- The use of internet polls on many websites (for serious or less serious reasons); and
- The development of electronic 'purpose built' voting systems.

The core similarity is that these systems use computers to store and calculate the outcome of the electoral process, but the specific configuration can be quite diverse, from:

- The use of internet voting through specially-developed voting pages;
- The use of private networks (such as local area networks) to allow for voting online; and
- The use of 'stand alone' computers or similar machines to automate the voting process in designated polling locations.

Risks and fears

Australians have embraced electronic systems for all manner of sensitive and personal transactions: from financial transactions such as banking, and paying for goods and services, to intimate social interactions such as online dating, and virtual sex. However, the question of placing political elections online has generally been treated cautiously by that small section of the Australian community that has considered the issue.

Mostly this caution comes from two sources:

- A belief that online transactions are by nature insecure or insubstantial. This has two elements: First, a concern that electronic systems can be tampered with by internal actors, or by external actors such as hackers, in order to deliver a misleading result. Second, that these systems are more fallible than printed voting ballots, and could be subject to accidental destruction or loss. Given the nature of the internet as an open network, and ongoing publicity over computer crime using this technology, there is concern that any election system developed using this medium would be subject to attack. Even if this attack were not successful in altering the outcome of the election, it could disrupt the voting process through what is called a 'denial of service' attack on the communications infrastructure.

- An awareness of significant limitations and suspicion of electoral fraud associated with the 2000 Presidential election in the US. The close outcome of this election, legal disputes over vote counting, and revelations of the limitations of some electronic voting machines employed in this election received significant negative press in Australia as well as in the US. Thus, while the United Kingdom (UK) has employed a range of electronic and online voting systems in a number of local government elections, there is a widespread belief that these systems present significant democratic risks. As perceptions of fraud can undermine the perceived legitimacy of the outcome, these perceptions are as damaging as any actual tampering.

Democratic implications

The democratic implications of electronic voting are potentially quite complex, depending on the approach taken. Approaches can include remote voting, local networked systems, stand-alone voting machines, and the use of paper records to supplement the system.

The most commonly cited implications of the introduction of electronic and online voting systems are:

- Positive:
    - The systems provide greater levels of access, particularly for the mobility impaired, people who live remotely or are overseas, or people who have difficulties with the conventional ballot paper;
    - They afford faster tabulation and the declaration of electoral outcomes;
    - The automation of data entry and processing reduce tabulation errors;
    - The system can be developed to provide additional information to electors to improve their chance of an informed vote; and
    - The systems reduce informal votes (accidental vote spoilage) and ambiguous votes.

- Negative:
    - The implementation devalues or undermines the act of voting, either turning it into a 'computer game' or reducing social connectedness through eliminating the physical community of the polling place;
    - The system is inherently insecure with the potential for localised or systematic manipulation, domestic or international. This manipulation may never be detected;
    - Online systems could encourage vote selling;
    - The systems, particularly internet-based voting, systematically lower the cost of participation for those affluent enough to access the technology, and do little for under-privileged members of the community. This deepens and widens social exclusion; and
    - The systems are complex and place an unwarranted burden on electoral regulators. As these organisations tend to be relatively small, given the periodic nature of their work, this will distract from their performance in other areas of electoral administration.

However, it should be noted that unlike in the UK or the US—two jurisdictions that have invested heavily in electronic voting systems—the motivation for introducing these systems in Australia is very different. While the UK and US tend to focus on these technologies as a means to increase voter participation,

either through lowering the costs of voting, or providing remote voting to citizens who are overseas, the compulsory nature of voting in Australia reduces turnout concerns. Thus, proponents of electronic voting in Australia tend to emphasise access by people with language difficulties, such as non-English speaking voters or those with limited vision or mobility. The speed of tabulation has been another argument of practical relevance, particularly in jurisdictions with complex electoral systems, such as the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).

The democratic benefits therefore, are real, but modest, largely providing for:

- More informed participation by those citizens with limited levels of English; and
- The capacity of the vision-impaired community to cast an unassisted vote and hence enjoy the benefits of secret ballots.

Because these benefits are modest relative to the possible costs associated with establishing these systems, it is unsurprising that Australian governments have been cautious in adopting the technology. In addition, the nature of the preferential system tends to discourage the use of some forms of remote polling, as there is a need to represent the 'virtual' ballot as closely as possible to the conventional ballot paper.

Activities to date

At present only the ACT has developed and implemented an electronic voting system for binding political elections. Internet voting systems, however, are becoming increasingly popular in commercial and union elections, due to the significantly lower costs of administration. The ACT's approach focuses on the development of a set of low-cost, simple to use, electronic voting computers that are modified versions of conventional desktop systems.

The ACT first offered electronic voting in eight locations in 2001 and again in 2004. The system, while subject to ongoing review, appears to have been accepted by the ACT population with use of the system doubling between 2001 and 2004. The ACT Electoral Commission has noted that the system appears to have reduced the level of informal voting.[43] However this claim is difficult to assess given the possibility of motivated (knowledgeable) electors disproportionately using the system over the paper version. Overall, however, it appears that the ACT will continue to be at the forefront of this technology in Australia for the immediate future.

[43] Elections ACT, 2005

The approach of the ACT government, in using open source code that can be reviewed by the public for flaws or limitations, appears to represent a greater commitment to the openness of the electoral process than has been exhibited in the United States, where private vendors retain the intellectual property rights for their systems and refuse public access to review the quality or integrity of the operating software employed.

In 2004, the Electronic Democracy Inquiry of Victoria recommended that a similar system (with printed records) be introduced on a trial basis, specifically for the purposes of assisting the vision impaired and non-English speaking Victorian community. This recommendation has been cautiously adopted, as a potential pilot project, by the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC). The Committee rejected the suggestion that internet-based voting be undertaken on the grounds that:

- The technical implementation costs would be higher than the value of the system (given high turnout rates);
- The risk of disruption to the system was significant, and could not be safely mitigated by the State; and
- There was no public demand for an internet-based voting system by Victorians.

The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters of the Parliament of Australia, in its inquiry into the 2004 federal election, has also made a cautious recommendation that there be consultation over experimental arrangements (electronic voting) to assist the blind and visually impaired to cast a secret ballot at the next federal election.

ICTs and the electoral roll

While voting in Commonwealth, State and Territory elections is generally compulsory for all citizens, and most local government elections require the majority of citizens to vote, the quality of the compulsory voting regime is dependent on the quality of the electoral roll.

For many years, the electoral roll system has been computerised, making its management (additions, removals, changes of address) increasingly swift and accurate, when compared with paper or card-based systems used in previous years. For electoral officials, charged with the process of ensuring enrolment and participation, however, the capacity to achieve universal participation has been improved through general developments in computerisation in and around government.

Traditionally, while enrolment was regarded as an obligation of citizenship, electoral officials engaged in a variety of advertising campaigns prior to the close of the electoral roll to ensure that unenrolled voters were prompted to enrol, and those who had not updated their enrolment information were reminded to provide the electoral administration agency with their current place of address.

In recent years this 'outreach' approach has been supplemented by:

- Cooperative agreements between the Commonwealth and State governments to exchange enrolment information, allowing enrolment processes to be streamlined, and enrolment information to be verified; and
- An increasing array of co-operative relationships between electoral organisations and other government and quasi-government organisations (such as Australia Post driver registration agencies, or utilities companies) to allow enrolment information to be generated for individuals who change their address.

The overall benefit of this inter-organisational cooperation has been to improve the comprehensiveness of the electoral roll. While the total number of citizens who fail to enrol in successive elections remains quite small, the continual improvement to electoral roll management provides a positive benefit to ensuring the widest possible electoral participation.

Conclusion

Overall, the role of ICTs in recent electoral campaigns and their impact on the quality of Australia's democratic system remains mixed. The response of political parties to the development of new forms of communication with voters has been quite conservative. The differential take-up of computer technologies in the campaigning process reflects to a large extent the existing bias in the Australian party competition. It is possible to conclude that the uptake of ICTs by Australia's existing political parties has had no significant implications for Australian democracy, either positive or negative.

Outside of the party system, the rise of alternative voices in formal electoral campaigns does present modest improvement to the depth of democratic debate and opinion available to Australian citizens. One of the significant barriers to the wider impact of these alternative sources of information in shaping public opinion has been the complex relationship between alternative new media sources of political information and opinion, and the mainstream media.

Mainstream journalism and new media have tended to highlight only those online sources of alternative opinion that reflect the style of traditional news and current affairs. Overall, however, the appearance of new forms of political opinion and organisation during recent electoral campaigns can be seen as quite positive, particularly given the tendency for the number of sites to grow from election to election. The only significant risks to democratic participation in Australia from these alternative news and opinion channels is the clear risk that, maliciously or through ignorance, some of these new communications channels will be used to propagate slander or misinformation.

Some in the community have been disappointed that moves to modernise the system of voting through electronic or online voting systems have been modest in scope. However, the considerable risks (and community perception of risks) encourage a cautious approach to the implementation of these systems so as not to undermine the legitimacy of electoral outcomes. While the time may not be right for the use of internet-based voting systems because of problems associated with security, the use of electronic voting machines in strictly controlled polling locations appears to afford a small, but real democratic benefit to those members of the community who traditionally experience barriers to casting a private vote. The expansion of this form of electronic voting, therefore, would constitute an ongoing incremental benefit to democracy in Australia.

Strengths

- Australia has a long tradition of relatively free and fair elections, with high levels of public participation.
- Most political parties have provided large amounts of information, and access to candidate details via websites.
- ICTs have been employed by electoral regulators to increase public awareness of the electoral process and communicate with electors about processes and outcomes.
- Innovations in electronic voting have been cautious, but aimed at improving the quality of access and participation, rather than lowering administrative costs.

Weaknesses

- Political party websites have tended to be information repositories aimed at 'pushing' information at electors, rather than places for debate or interaction between members of the public and candidates.
- Some areas of campaigning online have violated electoral laws, particularly some anonymous websites.
- The uptake of electronic voting systems has been very slow in Australia, compared with similar nations (UK, USA).
- ICTs, particularly the internet, have not been employed by regulators to facilitate informed participation in elections.

Civil society: Fighting the good fight?

This chapter describes how Australian civil society is making use of ICTs, and how these efforts are affecting the four democratic values of equality, popular control, civil liberties and vibrant public debate. The existence of a vibrant and active civil society has generally been regarded as one of the core components of a democratic society, either through active participation in formal political processes (as political participants or 'watchdogs' of the public interest), or with regard to the expectation that citizens have an obligation to inform themselves to participate in political life in a meaningful way.

Like most democratic notions, 'civil society' is not an easily defined concept. In some definitions, it explicitly includes non-government groups like major business interests and political parties. In others, it refers only to non-profit associations and the actions of individuals. In this review, the term is used to denote non-government actors, but will here be restricted to the non-mass media private sector, individuals, and organisations (with parties given a separate treatment, as above).

The democratic projects initiated by civil society players to engage their peers, and to create voices that can influence political actors and bureaucrats, represent the active form of Australia's civil society. In addition, this is complemented by the ways governments reach out to civil society organisations to offer them access to the policy process, recognising their 'representative' function or ability to generate relevant policy ideas (see next section). However, because government consultation is often absent, limited or offered as a 'service' rather than a

partnership, civil society is commonly left to fill gaps between formal political processes and the community. These become challenges and opportunities for non-government actors and entrepreneurs to have significant impacts on the democratic process.

The following section provides a broad overview of the ways civil society is participating in the democratic process in Australia via ICTs. It must be noted at the outset, however, that the current dynamic is towards less interest and involvement in the political process, a trend that technology alone cannot address. Thus, all forms of online engagement are limited to the small minority that sees participation as worthwhile.

Background issues, trends, and constraints

The use of ICTs by Australian civil society has been steadily increasing over the past decade, expanding the possible impacts on democratic process. Many impacts seem contradictory: convenient convergent technologies also bring vulnerability to cyber attack, identity theft, and information overload. Wider availability of technology is democratising, but enhances the gap for those who sit on the wrong side of the 'digital divide'. These factors are common to all uses of ICTs, including those that are deliberately established to facilitate democracy.

Some of the Australian answers to these questions about democratic communications are local, some national, and others are part of international dynamics. Before considering specific initiatives that involve civil society in democratic processes, it is useful to provide the overall context. This will both highlight issues specific to Australia and show where global factors are important. Of significance is an overall environment of declining civic participation in the political process, along with diminished trust in public institutions, including the mass media.

Digital divides

One of the principal areas of concern remains the 'digital divide'. This is a social barrier that restricts participation by those Australians without access to, or the skills to employ, ICTs to enhance their freedom of action as citizens. Such digital dilemmas are a critical factor in enabling or inhibiting the ability of Australians to access and contribute to information and discussion concerning their own futures.

First world quality infrastructure is a minimal requirement to optimise democratic interactivity via ICTs. Given the correlation between a lack of access and wider economic, social, and political disadvantage, civil society organisations have often been deeply involved in attempts to address these social concerns, in partnership with some governments (see next section).

Of concern for all four democratic values is the ability of citizens to have equal access to means of communication. A report prepared for the Networking the Nation Board described the disadvantages that rural people face when their telecommunications are substandard, compared to urban Australia.[44] Another report in Western Australia revealed (unsurprisingly) that the demand for electronic services increases with the distance from a regional centre.[45]

In addition to distance as a barrier to participation, lack of affordable broadband services looms as another dimension to the digital divide. Both these factors are likely to affect the ability of civil society to achieve equal participation and popular control, given that public debate and dialogue are increasingly moving online.[46]

A limited right to speak

Australia has neither a First Amendment guarantee of freedom of expression, nor mandated public funding for community media. Thus, there is no guaranteed right to know or speak. Moreover, the stringent laws covering defamation are often sufficient to dampen public discussion. This is particularly true for non-profit organisations or individuals with limited legal skills or the capacity to fight legal actions over material published online. The quality and quantity of public debate suffers as a result.

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation, or SLAPP suits are also used to silence public criticism.[47] Copyright law is another area that currently discourages debate and sharing of alternative forms of information. Given Australia's highly concentrated media ownership, reality TV and lifestyle programming are the favoured options for electronic audience involvement.

Skills and infrastructure

Australia suffers from limitations of scale, since its population is not large enough to support the many critical masses that exist in the US and the UK. On the other

[44] Karin Geiselhart, 2004, *The Electronic Canary: Sustainability Solutions for Australian Teleservice Centres*, Paper prepared for Community TeleServices Australia, Inc, commissioned by the Networking the Nation Board, Canberra, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts

[45] Sheryl Siekerka, Dan Scherr and Jamie Robertson, 2003, *Telecommunications Needs Assessment: The Communications Needs of Regional Western Australians*, July, Department of Industry and Resources (WA)

[46] Robert Jaques, 2005, 'Americans bin newspapers and turn to the web' www.vnunet.com/vnunet/news

[47] see Sharon Beder, 2004, 'A SLAPP in the face of democracy', Democratic Audit of Australia, December, http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/

hand, Australia's smaller and somewhat more homogeneous, highly urbanised society may facilitate the achievement of consensus. It is not yet clear how these factors affect the ability to innovate with new media or its impact on the democratic process.

Interest groups seeking to provide online services often face difficulties unless they can attract supporters and volunteers (or sponsorship and/or grant funding) to provide the technical infrastructure and maintenance. While much government funding is aimed at assisting small to medium enterprises with electronic commerce or intellectual property issues, relatively little goes to the many tiny community groups and organisations that need help with these matters.

Communities of practice evolve around different democratic values, and increasingly have an online component. There is already an extensive literature on the role of ICTs in generating social capital, mostly from a North American perspective. Communities of interest are most likely to support bonding social capital, or reinforcement of existing ties and trust relations.

Open sources and 'social software'

As ICTs have developed, the distinction between free services and paid services has become a dividing issue. One dimension of this debate is open-source software. This is 'free' software that allows and even encourages the source code to be modified and adapted. A more recent twist to the open source concept is open content, or media created by witnesses and then sent on to wide audiences through various media channels.

Because digital media opens the door to low cost content, now including phone video, it inherently feeds the processes of public discourse via alternative forms of information. This user-generated content, also known as 'citizen journalism' or 'open source journalism' has implications for the mass media and the political process. Feeding information to collective websites, live internet feeds and blogs, etc,. requires social software to manage the flow. One leading example globally is Wikipedia. This allows amendments and additions, thereby harnessing the knowledge of the widest possible range of sources. These open-source approaches have the potential to foster political equality. When they are effective, they can also support popular control of government by increasing transparency and accountability and deliberative democracy through broadening the sources of information for public debate.

Activities and examples

This section outlines the ways that civil society is currently using ICTs to influence democratic process in Australia. Not all are intentional. Many ICT projects have incidental impacts on democratic process. For instance, a retailer of music CDs may provide a forum for comments and discussion on a website, and this may generate substantial discussion about copyright and illegal downloading of music. However, the forum was not designed to influence government policy, and therefore is not considered a democratic ICT project.

To some extent, all online communication may be considered part of the 'background noise' of democratic process. The scope here is constrained to projects that overtly relate to the four democratic values, and draws on examples where possible. In some cases, overseas examples are presented as evidence of Australia's less mature use of ICTs for democratic process.

Influence of overseas ICT democracy projects

Many international online democracy projects inform and influence activities in Australia. These are too numerous to catalogue and have perhaps never been counted. Two will suffice to describe their overt role in the democratic process, and as models for what could be possible here.

The first is the Institute for Public Accuracy (IPA), which aims to 'increase the reach and capacity of progressive and grassroots organisations (at no cost to them) to affect public policy by getting them and their ideas into the mainstream media. IPA gains media access for those whose voices are commonly excluded or drowned out by government or corporate-backed institutions'.[48] They help to provide progressive perspectives on issues such as the environment, human rights, foreign policy and economic justice. While their e-mail notices are generally US-centric, they provide information that is essential for an informed civil debate in today's globalised world. IPA offers commentators who can balance the often right-wing perspectives of US mainstream media.

Another useful US project is Fairness and Accuracy in the Media (FAIR) that corrects and rebalances coverage in the mass media. It roughly fills the niche of the ABC's Media Watch television program, but in more depth and with the aim of stimulating activism. Both the IPA and FAIR have no direct correlate in Australia.

Some Australian projects are inspired by or directly modelled on similar projects in the US. One such is getup.org, based on the highly successful moveon.org in the US. With its much larger population, the US is more developed in

[48] http://accuracy.org

electronic engagement. Getup.org may be an exception in Australia, as it seems to be well funded. Its board is also broad-based, and includes a union official, representatives from several political parties, and an internet millionaire.

It is typical of the higher bandwidth content that is now providing more dynamic content, and features video clips to get its message across. Getup invites donations, encourages contacting others about the site, provides e-mail updates and allows easy e-mailing of all Coalition members, though this becomes spam for politicians, so decreasing its impact. Given the general low levels of engagement by citizens, it remains to be seen whether these types of organisations can attract this group and influence the political process in the ways they hope.

Who runs our civil society ICT projects?

Government efforts aside, the most significant democratic ICT projects in Australia have been established by business people and social entrepreneurs. There has been little government support for either engaging citizens or funding non-profit ICT development or initiatives, particularly at the federal level. The field has mostly been explored by private individuals and organisations and a few university-funded researchers.

This does not mean that non-government organisations are ineffective in their uses of ICTs to achieve democratic outcomes. There is, however, a fairly direct relationship between levels of funding and ICT presence and participation for organisations as well as for individuals. Thus, with some exceptions, larger institutions such as the Australian Council for Social Service (ACOSS), the Labor Council of New South Wales, and the Australian Consumers' Association (ACA) are better represented online than small, very local groups. They are therefore better able to gather stakeholder views and harness their social capital to influence government.

These larger organisations are gradually becoming more sophisticated in their ability to encourage online participation and action. ACOSS runs a virtual network about welfare, and their site is able to send a personalised e-mail to relevant members of parliament. On the other hand, Workers Online, the 'official organ of labornet', provides an excellent news service but limited interactivity. It simply uses the efficiencies of electronic delivery to provide a service, but does not facilitate dialogue and action.

To the extent that their resources and technological skills allow, NGOs use digital media to reach out to their members, conduct business more efficiently, make

their own internal processes transparent, and gather views to ensure their growth and development are responsive to stakeholders. Because NGOs are subject to similar governance issues as the governments they often lobby, they are subject to similar fallibilities of internal democratic processes.

NGO transparency or consultation with stakeholders is frequently inadequate or absent. From the smallest to the largest institutions, the predominant values will determine how open they will be, regardless of the tools at their disposal. A good example of this is getup.org, which aims to mobilise public opinion on issues, but does not provide means by which the issues selected for action can be influenced by its membership base. Transparency always brings a certain vulnerability, and many organisations are unable to become truly driven by and responsive to their stakeholders, in a process that could be described as 'turning themselves inside out'.

Projects that seek to enlarge civic information and debate do not always succeed. Even given optimal circumstances of access and relevance, participation and engagement are the exception, rather than the norm. Thus, many community networks have few participants interested in their online forums, and the ACA struggles to get comments on policy matters. The active phase of initiatives to inform the community about a specific issue tend to be short-lived, such as the Defend and Extend Medicare website before the 2004 federal election.[49] Without the serious funding that is needed for an equivalent commercial website and marketing campaign, social participation projects are unlikely to be sustainable or professional enough to make an impact on public dialogue.

Major Australian civil society projects online

Although there has been much experimentation with new media for democratic purposes in Australia, only two projects have risen above the background noise to become influential. That is, they have become part of the media that decision makers themselves notice and engage with. Interestingly, both were established by men with a political and business background. These small 'L' liberals also fit into the category of social entrepreneurship.

On Line Opinion is probably the best Australian example of a well planned (and increasingly successful) effort to provide a wide range of views and encourage deliberation. It is deliberately non-partisan and maintains not-for-profit status. These features, along with software that facilitates blogging and discussion,

[49] http://defendandextendmedicare.org/index.php

attract sponsorships and diversity. It provides an important channel for intelligent articles from individuals who do not frequently gain access to mainstream media channels.

Some 'outing' occurs, as when the author of a feature article decrying the existence of global warming is exposed by commentators as being in the pay of oil companies, a classic example. In mainstream media, the exposure process takes longer and is less certain.

On Line Opinion is run by the non-profit group National Forum. As it attracts more sponsors and resources, often from Australian universities, the Forum is expanding its range of citizen-oriented information services. They are now developing a citizen consultation process as part of their What the People Want (WTPW) project, and selling websites as a move towards financial sustainability. They have done research on the troubled Queensland public health system, resulting in a submission to two health inquiries. National Forum maintains a high standard of transparency, and the submission and interim reports are both available publicly on their website. They encourage discussion about this, and are gradually reaching a critical mass of public attention. Their work is starting to be covered by the mainstream media: a good indicator of influence.

WTPW is based on research. For instance, they offer questionnaires about industrial relations, and the responses will become part of their report. The quiet manifesto of WTPW is to 'abolish the silent majority'. Part of the National Forum's strength is the way it builds coalitions, by working with university researchers, other NGOs, unions and think tanks. It also takes paid advertising for its pages, and thus copies the approach of successful electronic services such as Google. An interesting feature is the overlap with the broadcast media, via a fortnightly talkback program on the ABC in Brisbane.

More notorious and risky is the Crikey project. Founded by Stephen Mayne, media adviser to then Premier of Victoria Jeff Kennett, it has since been sold and continues as a business venture. The motto for the site is 'empowering the irritated'. It is a good example of the open sources approach to journalism, as it relies on tips and information from subscribers. The goal is more discovery and connecting information than deliberation. Delivered daily as an e-mail, it rises above the status of an online gossip column due to the public values it reinforces: exposure of wrong-doing and the inner workings of the powerful, compliance of officials in corrupt practices, even embarrassing egoism and vanity.

Mayne continues to focus on shareholder activism, and is now one of many specialists that write for Crikey. In its early days a number of lawsuits and defamation actions kept Crikey on the financial and legal edge. Australians love to see the good family man take on big business and the mainstream commercial media, and bought subscriptions to Crikey partly as a form of voyeuristic sponsorship. It is a healthy indication of the state of Australian democracy that Crikey is now on a more secure, though perhaps less edgy, footing.

While not as explicitly aimed at improving democratic process as the National Forum, Crikey nevertheless has registered on the mass media consciousness and contributed especially to alternative sources of information. By holding business, media and political power brokers to account, it has at the least an indirect influence on popular control of government and the quality of public debate.

Mayne's ongoing work as a shareholder activist is part of a global trend to use proxy voting and electronic communications to pressure the corporate sector to avoid damaging social and environmental behaviour. Crikey continues to bring important aspects of the democratic process to public attention. For example, it has highlighted problems with Australia's Freedom of Information, along with the ability of Ministers to use their discretionary powers to keep documents from being accessed. Part of this reporting involved quoting and commenting on editorials in the mainstream print media, contributing to the overall vitality of public discussion.

Minor Australian civil society projects online

This section gives an overview of other Australian civil society ICT projects that have implications for the four democratic values. These are again indicative only, rather than comprehensive.

At least one member of the Canberra Press Gallery is trying to bring a broader range of political content to a wider audience. Daniel Bolger, founder of bytext.com, specialises in providing audio, video and transcripts of annual general meetings, press conferences, speeches, and other events. Given the current structure of the mass media, most of these are treated as ephemeral and not covered. However, the nature of the electronic marketplace means that there is a small market for a wide range of diverse content that caters to a wider set of 'publics'. Bolger aims to meet this using internet streaming and podcasting. His plan to provide MPTV would allow Members of Parliament to update and interact with citizens far removed from Canberra. The underlying

goal is to give information and thereby influence to the public, while providing a commercial service.

Slightly more tangential to the democratic process is the website 'Not Good Enough' (NGE).[50] It illustrates the many overlaps between civil society communications and formal processes of governance. Founded by academic and social entrepreneur Dr Fiona Stewart, NGE is a user-supported website that acts as an intermediary between consumers and companies. Their stated aim is clearly related to the Democratic Audit's four democratic processes: 'The aim of the NGE website is to use the power of the Internet to scrutinise and publicise corporate behaviour - good and bad'. They overtly want to make company behaviour more transparent and accountable, increase information sharing between consumers, and encourage best practice.

NGE receives complaints (and compliments) about goods and services, and offers the companies an opportunity to reply. Those who are unsatisfactory get a serve on the site and via the associated e-mail list. The site hosts debate among its members and subscribers, but will not tolerate false or mischievous complaints or compliments about companies or government. Thus, it is contributing to accountability, public debate and alternative forms of information. It is creating a form of national community of practice (or perhaps of complaint). The only missing element is research about how well this site (or others in a similar vein) achieves its goals.

Several other Australian projects that share information and foster dialogue and discussion will round out this sampler. These include:

- A mailing list run by the Internet Society of Australia, which discusses relevant issues such as internet governance;
- Several feminist politics and policy mailing lists, including Ausfem-Polnet (established 1996, 900 subscribers in 2003), and Pamelas-List that links over 60 national women's organisations;
- A health finance list, run by an academic in Victoria, that includes articles (mostly from Australian mainstream media) about the financing of health and drugs in particular;
- Global Trade Watch mailing list and website, alerting Australians to international trade issues and national developments, such as the details and implications of bilateral trade agreements;

[50] www.notgoodenough.org

- Fibreculture is a website and mailing list "for the exchange of articles, ideas and arguments on Australian IT policy in a broad, cultural context". Founded by Dutch new media researcher Geert Lovink, it attracts a wide range of academics, artists, policy makers and community activists. The group has run a conference and published a book;
- Indymedia in Australia is part of a global network of independent media centres that have become part of a global network of independent media;
- The Democratic Audit of Australia, under the auspices of which this report is published. As well as publishing reports such as this, the Audit has encouraged debate about democratic values via the papers it publishes on its webpage and its breaking news feature; and
- The Southern Cross Group, which provides information for, and campaigns on behalf of, Australian ex-pats.

In addition, a myriad of bloggers (including two of the authors) express themselves electronically. Many invite the public to join in, and a few, such as Margo Kingston, become widely known.[51]

Because new media is constantly evolving, experiments are frequent and a topic for research. 'Smart mobs' are sudden gatherings that send out the time and location via SMS, or mobile phone text messaging, highlighted at the Cronulla race riots in December 2005. As elsewhere, anti-globalisation protests in Australia have made great use of electronic communications to organise. Other services and software include ways to syndicate video as well as text and photos, often using a peer-to-peer distribution rather than a centralised broadcast. This helps keep costs of bandwidth down and provides flexibility between creators and distributors. The Wiki approach mentioned in the introduction is also starting to appear at more local and specialist levels, creating a store of shared philosophy and values embedded in the topics and their agreed upon definitions.

New relationships or social noise?

The wide range of new media allow many new players to 'meet up' in cyberspace, and not just for dating services. People who cross paths online, perhaps while debating or responding to requests for resources on a topic, are already linked through their common interest.

[51] Journalist, Margo Kingston, ran a popular 'webdiary'. The site she established continues though she is no longer running it: http://webdiary.com.au/

However, new media by itself is unlikely to develop social capital outside these individuals' existing patterns of political and social support. This is partly because people overwhelmingly tend to choose communications and communicators who reinforce their existing values and knowledge. Marriages, for example, between people of opposing political views are notably unusual. Likewise, partnering between organisations is more likely to be the 'bonding' forms of social capital that network similar groups, rather than the 'bridging' forms of social capital that forge new relationships.

However, given an existing pool of people or organisations with similar social goals, new supporters can quickly cluster about a virtual gathering place. It may be more problematic to sustain these enthusiasms after the policy crisis or election day has passed. The power of these distributed technologies to allow for low cost organisation cannot be denied, and examples of grassroots organisations making significant efforts to mobilise and organise online (such as the Chillout, children out of detention group)[52] are becoming increasingly common.

Civil society institutions are subject to the same parameters regarding new media as the individuals within them. As discussed above, many organisations are unable or unwilling to become truly responsive to their members. However, those that do realise the advantages of a networked approach over a traditional hierarchical approach can thrive using new media as a tool. Those that resist, and attempt to maintain communications from a central hub, can find themselves decreasingly relevant. This transformative pattern is being repeated in many dimensions of the emerging information-based society.

These networking patterns take strength from their very diffuseness. They are able to bring in people with different voices, from different backgrounds and geographic settings. The ability to hear the bureaucrat's perspective, if you are an isolated woman in outback Queensland, can help generate constructive dialogue. Likewise, communication beyond other borders of class, region, relation, and nation can enlighten global debates. While more communication is not necessarily (or even usually) part of the solution, in the cluttered chatter of cyberspace, tolerance and good intentions are present in good measure, along with the hate and stereotyping. Thus, the use of ICTs for social capital is not limited to issues that impact directly on Australians. The internet allows 'citizens without borders' to communicate instantly about anything and everything.

[52] http://www.chilout.org/

Uncivil uses of ICTs

A brief but salutary foray into the dark side of civil society is necessary to round out the above discussion of the ways civil society uses ICTs for democratic processes. It is only possible here to give a few examples and make the point that government, the mass media and private companies often have a strong vested interest in inhibiting public information and debate. They also frequently act to gather information about citizens and in ways that are not conducive to open dialogue. Like many of the topics considered in this report, the use of new media and the internet for nefarious purposes is the subject of much research and concern. While the specific examples provided below are international, all could either be replicated within Australia, or by their nature have implications for Australian democratic process.

To begin with, there are significant publicly funded information projects that have mass registration and surveillance as their goals, often under the rubric of anti-terrorism legitimacy. Australia is at the forefront of such projects. It will suffice here to say that keeping track of travellers, monitoring electronic transactions and communications, cross-referencing data-bases and mining it for security purposes is not always compatible with the protection of civil liberties. The lack of transparency about these projects (again for security reasons) makes it less likely that breaches of law can be revealed or addressed (see next section).

Within the private sector, the targeting of medical practitioners for finely tuned marketing activities involves the collection and correlation of data about prescribing habits with doctors' details. Large expenditures and resources are aimed at influencing doctors. Along the way, the quality of public debate is debased.

Finally, even the most violent of terrorists is, in some sense, part of civil society. The latest efforts to infiltrate their networks include recruiting from likely community groups and participating and monitoring blogs and chat lines where terrorists might lurk.

In addition to these prominent examples, many smaller issues remain to be resolved as participation goes virtual. Most of these are not new, but new technologies can make detection or remedy more complex. What, for example, are the ethics of podcasting a university lecture without asking permission? Surreptitious recording has long been possible, but podcasting means this material, which may be copyrighted to the lecturer, can now be broadcast, cached, and reused more easily. Other questions of accuracy and manipulation carry over from older media.

These examples reinforce the earlier assertion that ICTs are inherently neither good nor bad for civil society, its institutions and relations. ICTs are always just tools in the hands of actors seeking to establish their influence. The next section provides an integrating analysis of these threads, and includes a discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of ICTs for each of the four democratic values around which this audit is organised.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the current situation regarding the use of ICTs for democratic purposes by civil society. As well as describing the scope of existing projects, it provided an analysis of the factors that make such projects more or less likely, and their potential for success. This section looks at what has been achieved and what the future might hold, given the Australian context.

A number of experiments by social entrepreneurs such as the founders of the National Forum, Crikey, and Not Good Enough have demonstrated the capacity for new media to engage civil society in ways that do indeed enhance those four democratic values. Wider sharing of information, discussion and debate, input into policy processes and cross-fertilisation with many other civil society avenues are some of the positive outcomes that can be observed from these and many other smaller civil society ICT projects.

The full scope of civil society influence is difficult to assess, perhaps because it is not usually measured. In Australia, there is not a lot of hard evidence that the structure or direction of policy debates have been significantly altered by the introduction of new communication channels. Without the firm commitment of governments to become fully responsive to their citizenry, new media provides opportunities for many people to speak largely to themselves and their like-minded colleagues. A critical mass to change the government approach to citizen relations could come from civil society, assisted by new media.

The quality of public debate is difficult to assess, but measures could be suggested and tested. One danger of new media is that a great deal of chatter and flow will be produced, but with little cohesive action for change. There is always a risk that empowered individuals will mistake their own voices for democratic deliberation. Given the current domination of public policy discussion by the educated elite, this is a serious concern.

An alternative perspective on information and citizen engagement is the

'information commons'. This concept acknowledges the need for public access to information online as a democratic prerequisite. This access, however, is 'being damaged by a combination of restrictive technology, unbalanced changes to intellectual property law, onerous licenses, and media industry consolidation'.[53]

One example of these tangential yet detrimental changes is the decision in 2005 not to continue the funding of peak environmental advocacy groups. This is expected to hobble the ability of these groups to act collectively, and this will in turn flow on to their capacity to generate information and dialogue online. Without policy settings that recognise and support the contribution of civil society actors to democratic process, it is unlikely that any but the most highly funded groups can be effective, online or off. This again highlights the importance of integrated measures of civil society engagement that flow from the four core values of political equality, popular control of government, civil liberties and the quality of public debate. It seems individuals have great freedom to participate in civil society via ICTs, but their effectiveness is limited by the legal, economic and infrastructure hurdles that inhibit collective voices from arising.

Strengths
• Can give all citizens equal voice. • Can document and display wide range of content from diverse sources. • Can develop digital literacies via entertainment and education.
Weaknesses
• Allows extreme voices equal space and time. • Requires technical and economic access and skills to participate. • Dependent on values of organisers. • Content can be manipulated and falsified.

[53] Nancy Kranich, 2004, *The Informations Common—A Public Policy Report*, New York, Free Expression Project, www.fepproject.org

Public service: Open government or big brother?

By its size and the extent of its technical, human, and financial resources, the public service in Australia has a critical role in the democratic process. An impartial, professional public service is critical to the effective management of public affairs: acting at the direction of democratically-elected governments in the implementation of their public policy. A professional public service bureaucracy has sometimes been seen as a limitation on democracy. The argument here is that the size of the public service, and its longevity compared with governments, provides it with power to limit or restrict the rights of democratically-elected governments to act in accordance with their electoral mandates. In this way, the public service can be painted (in democratic terms) as a type of 'necessary evil': too large to be trusted, but essential for the administration of modern society.

A more nuanced view recognises that public servants can have positive (as well as negative) regard for the public interest. Recent versions of this view stem from two distinctly different sources: political sociological studies that have highlighted the role of 'policy entrepreneurs' in government who advocate reformist or progressive policies, and the New Public Management perspective that sees public managers as having a role in the creation of 'public value' through developing democratic dialogues with stakeholders and delivering outcomes in line with their expectations.

Each of these positions has value in considering the role of the public service in using ICTs to benefit or hinder democracy in Australia. In addition, however, it is important to recognise that the public service's use of ICTs can be divided between:

- Areas of activity that explicitly provide access to decision-making to the community. This type of activity is what could be termed 'electronic democracy' initiatives or projects, which are focused on the direct provision of a conduit into the policy process; and
- Areas of activity that have democratic impacts, but those impacts are implicit or generally diffused. This area is more difficult to review, as many of these types of activities are not easily identifiable as 'projects' or 'programs of government action' in the classic sense. Some examples of this would be provision of information online to increase public awareness of government decision making, facilitating general access to new media to support the public in accessing information, and the optimisation of government information to increase its 'discoverability' and readability. This aspect of public sector activity is important, and, as we can see in the analysis below, tends to be one of the major areas where the activities of the public sector have had significant impacts on democratic life in Australia.

In making these observations, however, we must be cautious in assigning responsibility or blame to 'the public service' as an amorphous organ of the state. Many of the issues discussed are attributable both to the action of public servants as individuals, to agencies and departments as key actors, and to the specific or general policies of governments.

Access and the digital divide

One of the first areas that must be considered is the highly positive role of the Australian public service in encouraging the use of ICTs in general terms. While programs aimed at providing free or subsidised access to the internet and training for citizens to use these technologies is not generally regarded as a 'democratic' activity per se, the significant investment in such programs over the past decade has been critical in expanding citizens' access to information, including access to new forms of politically relevant information. This type of activity can fall under the rubric of the development of an 'electronically-facilitated democracy' in that they lay the preconditions for greater use of ICTs by citizens across a range of social, economic, and political spheres.

These activities span the three levels of government in Australia: from broad or specific funding of training and community 'telecentres' by the Commonwealth, to the development of proactive educational programs to support information

technology literacy and fill 'electronic gaps' in the community at the State level; to the role of local governments via libraries, community houses, mobile vans, and—in some cases—subsidised bandwidth.

The extent of the 'digital divide' is difficult to determine, and depends on a range of factors that include:

- What constitutes access (possession of ICT, regular use of ICT, access to ICT in the immediate area);
- What is included in the definition of ICTs (some metrics focus solely on internet access, whereas others would include access to 'advanced' mobile telephony);
- The pervasiveness of ICTs in our society and the capacity to access data services indirectly (e.g. through interactive telephone services); and
- Different opinions of quantity versus quality of access.

Thus, while the proportion of Australians with frequent or periodic access to the internet sits between 50 and 65 per cent of the population (depending on data source), over 90 per cent of Australian homes have a landline telephone and the penetration of mobile telephones in the community sits at about 75 percent of the adult population.[54]

It is important, however, to be cautious about drawing a straight line between one type of technology take-up and another (i.e. that a predilection for landline telephones is related to mobile phone use, and then internet use). Given the popularity and portability of mobile telephony, for example, some segments of the Australian population may begin abandoning 'traditional' landline access. While this could be construed to display a declining position in raw statistical terms, it simply indicates that a greater degree of communications choice has entered the Australian marketplace, and a tendency for ICT purchasing decisions to be quite rational.

Some examples

To illustrate the work undertaken over the past decade, some case examples can be provided. These are not necessarily comprehensive, but give an overview of the type of activities the Australian public service has been engaged in within this policy area:

- Networking the Nation: Initiated in 1997 with funds sourced from the partial privatisation of Telstra, Networking the Nation (NTN) provided over $300 million to more than 70 projects around Australia. The projects range from

[54] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004, *1370.0 – 2004 Australia Now. Measures of Australia's Progress*, Canberra, ABS

activities supporting the development of telecommunications infrastructure (particularly rural mobile telephony), internet literacy programs, support for the development of electronic government service delivery in local government, and subsidised access to telecommunications and data services;

- Victoria's e-Gaps Program: launched in 2001 by the State government, this program committed $1.5 million to the provision of small grants to local communities which lacked substantive access to the internet. The distribution and management of these grants were largely focused at local government and community groups. Similar examples of 'targeted' funding can be seen across Australia, for example the ACT's Community IT Access Plan, which focuses on hardware and software provision, as well as training and local content creation;

- The Tasmanian government maintains an ongoing program of recycling public service computers into community groups on a yearly basis. This program has been running since 2002, and provides a rolling series of hardware grants based on applications against the pool of machines moving out of their productive life in Government;

- Banyule City Council, Victoria, provides a mobile training facility in its municipal borders ('the Cybervan').

It should be noted that these projects often involve a range of participants from across the public and non-profit sectors of Australia, and using 'public-private partnerships' as a means to deliver services through non-government intermediaries. The benefits of this approach tend to lie in the reduction of administrative costs to government, and the customisation of program delivery through local administration and governance. In addition, non-government groups act independently in this area, with GreenPC being an example of a not-for-profit organisation that works to recycle computers into the hands of people on limited incomes.

Institutional impacts

In the process of developing digital divide strategies in Australia some public institutions have had to redefine their social role. A good example of this is libraries, that—as local institutions with a traditional role in the provision of educational and social information—have increasingly become 'information hubs' providing not just books and periodicals, but a range of multimedia content (CD-ROMs, audio CDs, and DVDs) as well as internet access. Libraries, along with community

houses, have been at the forefront of the provision of free community access to the internet. This is due to a number of factors, such as the logical fit between their democratic role in society and internet access, but also their position as local access points between government and the community.

In this process of access provision, local governments have been particularly active, both as co-funders of these services, and in the development or implementation of training services to enhance ICT use in the Australian population.

Future directions and issues

While the history of digital divide initiatives in Australia is quite positive, we need to recognise that the divide, though shrinking, remains a social concern. This reflects not only a concern for issues of political equity (equity of access) but also a recognition that participation in the 'information society' has social, economic, and political benefits to those citizens who are 'connected'.[55]

In addition, the 'divide', and how it is conceived, is changing. During the early 1990s, the divide was largely identified to reflect three factors in Australia:

- Infrastructure and access issues (largely about telecommunications service provision);
- Socioeconomic status (largely concerned with issues of education and the cost of computers); and
- Gender (with disproportionately high numbers of men using the technology compared with women).[56]

Over the last decade, issues of gender have virtually disappeared, while the declining costs of basic computers (now costing less than $800 in some instances) and competitiveness in parts of the service provision area are narrowing socioeconomic issues.

The current concerns tend to focus on:

- Poverty and unemployment;
- Migrants (particular those from non-English speaking backgrounds);
- Age differences; and
- Rural and regional access.

[55] NOIE, 2003, *The E-Government Benefits Study*, Canberra, National Office for the Information Economy, www.agimo.gov.au ; Kristy Muir, 2004, *Connecting Communities with CTLCs: From the Digital Divide to Social Inclusion*, Sydney, The Smith Family

[56] Jennifer Curtin, 2001, A Digital Divide in Rural and Regional Australia? Current Issues Brief 1 2001–02, Canberra, Parliament of Australia

While approaches to these issues have shifted from 'wide scale' programs to focused programs, often at the community level,[57] major policy concerns remain that can only be addressed at the State or national level. These include:

- The emerging 'broadband divide', between those who have access to broadband and those who do not. While the level of broadband use in Australia has been steadily increasing, currently standing at 57 per cent of internet users,[58] rural and regional areas continue to face problems with accessing high speed reliable services at modest cost.[59] Given the higher costs (and computational demands of rich media) there is a strong relationship between levels of income and access to these advanced services; and
- The sustainability of investments already made in local and community access projects. While the approach to funding through small grants has been effective in maximising the return on investment of public money in access programs and training, the tendency for funding programs to end just prior to the completion of a complete technology cycle (the three-year maximum life expectancy of most hardware and software systems) leaves many of the investments subject to quick decline if they are unable to source new funding.

While the latter issue requires governments around Australia to maintain their commitment to address the digital divide, the former becomes increasingly problematic as Australia slips down global rankings on access to broadband services.

This particular problem is a feature of two factors:

- The great distances outside the major population centres that need to be provided with expensive infrastructure to service comparatively small numbers of people; and
- Declining capacity of the national government, as the key regulator of telecommunications services in Australia, to influence market decisions.

With the anticipated complete privatisation of the national telecommunications company, which provides the 'basic' level of telecommunications and data services regionally, the Australian government is losing direct influence over investment decisions made in rural areas. While the Commonwealth has a long

[57] The 'wired high rise' project in inner city Melbourne is a good example of the 'focused' approach.

[58] DCITA, 2005, The Current State of Play 2005, Canberra, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts: 9

[59] Broadband can be accessed throughout Australia via satellite, but this remains much more expensive, prohibitively so in many instances, than via cable or phone lines.

history of direct and indirect subsidy of regional services, debate surrounding the full privatisation of Telstra in 2005 failed substantially to address issues of broadband access in rural areas.

Thus, while the Commonwealth requires a minimum data service to be provided in most parts of Australia, the tendency for urban areas to benefit from competition (in the form of new investment and increasing bandwidth speed and coverage), and the potential for rural areas of the nation to remain stuck with very slow access speeds and poor quality of connection, remain ongoing policy problems. At the time of writing, however, this debate is unfolding, and the long term impacts remain unclear. It is likely, however, that increasing levels of public subsidisation will be required to develop a rural infrastructure system to ensure that Australia's rural access to broadband meets global standards.

The democratic risk here is not that service quality in rural Australia will decline, but that as the internet slowly reconfigures itself for high access speeds (integration of greater levels of multimedia and interactive elements), increasing regions of the online commons will become inaccessible to those on the wrong side of the broadband divide.

Transparency and accountability

Moving from the indirect impacts of government to the direct role of the public sector in supporting popular democracy, it must be recognised that the growth of ICT use in government has increased the level of information provided to the community through channels like the web and e-mail. While universities were early pioneers of online publication, the public service in Australia (and around the world) was quick to develop a host of websites, leading to an initial explosion in the availability of information to the public.

While the proliferation of content online has a clear democratic value, it is important to review a number of aspects. These include:

- The quality of information provided online;
- The relevance of online information to democratic outcomes (e.g. the value of this information in political socialisation);
- Developments over time; and
- The interactive use of ICT channels to provide additional information to citizens.

Online publication

The great advantage of the web for government departments and agencies is the capacity for this channel to 'repurpose' information. As government departments have always been prodigious producers of documents and reports, the development of the web allowed much of this information, from long reports, to short documents like press releases, to be posted online.

This has two advantages: first, it increases the speed and ease to which stakeholders and members of the community can gain access to the information; and, second, it has changed the economics of public sector publication. It has lowered costs in some areas by reducing demand for 'hardcopy' documents, or allowing the release of specialist information that would traditionally never have gone through the process of formal production (layout, printing, distribution).

During the mid-1990s, the public sector in Australia saw an explosive growth in the number of websites and online publications made available to members of the public. This growth was generally erratic, with larger, better resourced departments and agencies more likely to produce higher quality, more information-dense sites, and smaller agencies and the impoverished local government sector less likely to place large volumes of information online. Because of the general lack of centralised direction for these developments, the pattern of growth tended to produce a wide range of variations between and within organizations. The Australian public service, like others around the world, had difficulties in:

- Ensuring the quality of sites;
- Providing interoperability between sites; and
- Maintaining a professional management framework around the publication, retention, and archiving of material placed online.

In retrospect, however, the years between 1995 and 2002 may be seen as a 'golden age' of public service openness, with regards to web publication. While the quality of online publications was highly variable, the fact that limited ministerial and senior management attention was paid to these channels meant that a surprising amount of public service information was published online.

Since 2000, there has been an increased recognition of the importance of online channels, and a rationalisation of government publications online. Whilst much of this rationalisation is relatively value-free, the move to place online publications under centralised management processes has led to a reduction—in some areas—of the extent of material published on the web.

Thus, like government communications in general, the presence of a government website in Australia does not necessarily mean that information is more open or accessible. There is a tendency for documents to be removed from the web after a short period of time, or for some documents, like ministerial speeches, not to be published. This reflects a more general tendency for communications with the public to be careful managed by all levels of government.

Democratic quality?

Another consideration about information published online is the thought given to democratic aspects of communication by the public service. As governments have moved to rationalise expenditures on ICTs in line with general concerns with efficiency and economy, online resources are generally regarded in purely economic terms. While governments around Australia continue to invest heavily in online systems, the vast majority of this investment tends to be in electronic and online service delivery aspects, rather than democratic issues and concerns.

While this reflects general community interest in accessing government online, it should be recognised that public sector websites commonly provide little information in a form usable by the community about the operations of the department or agency. While most organisations provide general breakdowns of management structures, and in some cases descriptions of decision making processes, few government websites around Australia provide detailed, easy-to-understand educational material about how the organisation functions, how to influence decisions in the organisation, or pathways to democratic participation. In this area of political socialisation, the public service has missed a significant opportunity to improve its democratic relationship with the public.

In addition, the quality and political utility of government websites around Australia is highly variable. In a detailed analysis of local government websites in 2003, it was found that, generally, local governments are not providing online information that is useful in developing an understanding of the role or responsibilities of the municipality.[60] Only ten per cent of Australian local government websites provided information on their statutory functions. Thus, while these sites have been developing in terms of their service delivery capabilities, little progress has been made with regard to providing information relevant to political participation.

Three basic reasons can be posited for this:

- Lack of community demand for governance-related information;

[60] Tui McKeown, Julian Teicher and Nina Dow, 2004, 'Evaluating the value: Comparing local government initiatives in e-gov in the UK and Australia', Department of Management Working Paper 17/04, Melbourne, Monash University

- Limited resources on the part of local governments in Australia (for example, when compared with the much larger municipalities of the UK); and
- The ongoing tendency to treat this level of government (by Commonwealth and State governments) entirely instrumentally, e.g. as service delivery conduits, rather than democratic institutions in their own right. Recent forced amalgamations of local governments in Victoria and New South Wales, to encourage economic efficiency, illustrate this point well.

While there can be cynicism expressed about the slow development of effective digital record keeping in the public service around Australia, particularly regarding the accurate and effective storage and retrieval of 'ephemeral' digital content, like SMS messages and electronic mail, it should be recognised that there are considerable difficulties in the development and implementation of electronic record keeping systems, including:

- The wide range of systems used, and the limited capacity of some of these systems to integrate into electronic record keeping archives to provide for speedy cataloguing and depositing of digital records;
- Highly variable levels of IT literacy among public servants, particularly in the area of electronic signatures;
- *Ad hoc*, or personal acquisition of technology by public servants, that may not have the capacity for records to be accurately received and stored (this is particularly true in the area of mobile telephony); and
- The massive expansion in the number of documents that are generated in the process of public administration.

Accessibility?

In addition to the provision, or lack of provision, of information that facilitates democratic participation by citizens, two additional factors about web publishing in the public service should be noted:

- Questions of accessibility; and
- Questions of storage of digital information.

In terms of accessibility, the most common concern about public service websites is speed of access. People with slow internet connections and those with disabilities that require computer programs that convert textual content into speech, face considerable delay in retrieving relevant information.

Given the proliferation of government websites during the mid-1990s, it is generally recognised that the public service of Australia remains at a relatively early stage in developing (or retrofitting) policy frameworks to ensure that online information is accessible. The most commonly cited set of requirements, the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines contains a range of graduated recommendations for online publication that, if followed, lower barriers to accessibility.[61]

At present, governments around Australia have a mixed record on the implementation of these guidelines (or a modified version thereof). While most of the major jurisdictions (Commonwealth, States, and Territories) have adopted policies encouraging compliance with the lowest level (level A), these are generally:

- Inconsistently applied;
- Often framed as goals or recommendations, rather than minimum targets; and/or
- Sometimes specified without clear means to their achievement, such as investment in relevant systems.

The failure to develop better levels of compliance excludes some disabled or remote citizens from accessing large parts of publicly-available online information. Whilst community groups have been rightly critical of government performance in this area, it should be recognised that:

- The performance of the public service is, on average, vastly superior to that of the private sector in Australia (even though some legal risk of discrimination exists for organisations that are not proactive in this area);
- The replacement of existing content management systems with modern technologies is improving performance in an incremental manner; and
- The total number of people affected is low, while significant in terms of the impact on these individuals personally.

Thus, accessibility issues remain a democratic concern, but one where some progress is being made—even if it is slower than hoped, given the age of the WAI specifications.

The second area of concern lies in the appropriate storage, retention, and discovery of documents 'born digital'. As increasing amounts of government information never exist in a physical form, but are stored as webpages, e-mail

[61] http://www.w3.org/

messages, SMS text, or as raw data, governments around Australia have been interested in means to better manage these resources. This issue takes a number of forms:

- Development of processes to ensure electronic documents of importance are identified and stored;
- Development of systems to hold these records over time, and provide a fast and accurate way to search and retrieve them;
- Education of public servants as to the importance of electronic records and means to retain them effectively; and
- Identification of the right type of technologies (software and standards) to ensure that documents, when stored, will be in a format that will allow them to be retrieved long after the original software and hardware has become obsolete.

This issue is critical, both for the effective management of government and for democratic governance, particularly with regards to the operation of Freedom of Information laws (see below).

Across Australia, governments are at a relatively early stage of progression in this area, and it is likely that large amounts of public information may never be accurately stored or indexed in the gap between wide-scale digitisation and the introduction of universal electronic records management. This is not the result of sinister motivation on the part of policy makers or public servants, but reflects the tendency for electronic systems to be rolled out before the full organisational and democratic implications (and policy requirements) have been determined. While progress is being made in this area, it must be recognised that this issue has not received sufficient attention from policy makers, and the area of electronic records management has been significantly under-resourced in Australia.

FOI in an electronic age

The issue of Freedom of Information (FOI) and similar administrative law in Australia has been discussed in detail in other publications of the Democratic Audit, and the failings of these reforms need not be reiterated in this section. The presence or absence of ICTs has little direct impact on the basic limitations of these laws in terms of explicit exemptions employed to obscure public oversight,[62] or the manipulation of the FOI regulations to evade effective public oversight of

[62] For example, the use of commercial-in-confidence agreements by government to prevent documents being released under FOI.

government decision making.[63]

However, given the importance of FOI to the functioning of democracy, some relevant comments with regards to FOI and ICTs should be made. The role of ICTs in FOI is significant, at a number of levels:

- FOI is less of an issue where information is routinely published online (as above);
- However, even in these cases, it can be facilitated (or inhibited) by the presence (and absence) of good document management and retention systems;
- ICTs have been introduced into the FOI process to reduce costs. Some examples of this include: provision of information electronically and the use of 'electronic redacting' systems (electronic means to remove elements of requests that would not be granted release under the relevant Act); and
- Some agencies and jurisdictions (such as Victoria) have introduced online application processes which have lowered the cost of an FOI request.

Overall, the advent of ICTs, and the introduction of searchable databases for the management of electronic and physical records in the public service has not encouraged any government in Australia to re-consider their approach to FOI. In general, the advent of networked computers, digital record keeping, and the capacity to allow controlled access by the public into government records using technologies like the web have not been considered, and no government has seriously discussed a different approach to public record keeping that would see most public documents placed in public view as a matter of standard operating procedure.

One exception to this is the Senate order requiring Commonwealth departments and agencies to publish an indexed list of 'relevant' document titles related to policy matters produced by the department. This order, initiated by Senator Brian Harradine(Independent), has been complied with since 1994 in the form of a tabled document, and since 1998, published on the respective organisations' websites.

While this marks a positive step forward in the proactive release of information (or, more accurately information about information), the measure is limited in that:

- The selection of document titles listed is undertaken internally by the

[63] Such as revelations during the Inquiry into the Queensland health system in 2005 which revealed that Queensland Heath Department officials regularly took boxes of performance documents into Cabinet, with the explicit objective of excluding them from FOI.

agency in an informal manner. Some departments (such as the Defence Department) regularly publish extensive lists, while others (such as Human Services) provide less information. Clearly, the interpretation of documents 'relevant' to policy making is quite variable; and

- Awareness of the titles of documents provides no guarantee that they can be accessed.

'Your' ABC: innovation at the fringe of the public service

A good example of the hazy area between government, mass media, and civil society is offered by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). This combination has good potential for innovation with ICTs, because the ABC is relatively well resourced and its Charter includes obligations to inform and educate Australians. While not overtly concerned with democratic process or the four focal areas of the Audit, these tasks are nonetheless consistent with democratic process. The ABC must be taken into account because it is an important and trusted source (via TV, radio and the web) of information for Australians. The caveat is that the audience for the ABC is consistently less than 14 per cent of all audience share, at least for television. The ABC audience also tends to come from the upper socio-economic levels. While this group includes opinion leaders and decision makers, the narrowness and smaller size of the ABC audience limit its role in promoting political equality.

Given these demographic constraints, the ABC does provide both vital information and channels for civil society to participate in the democratic process through its interactive dimension. Often the ABC covers issues that other mass media are not interested in. While it is not possible here to provide an in-depth analysis of the ABC, over recent years increasing criticism of the purported 'left wing' bias of the ABC is reported to have engendered a climate of self-censorship and hesitancy within the organisation.[64] As a result, its role as an alternative and non-commercial broadcaster may have been compromised. This has diminished its nation-building function, which has a muted role in the ABC Charter.

Over the past decade, the ABC has been in the vanguard with its use of new media. These applications include simple mailing lists about upcoming programs, along with web-based transcripts of programs, audio streaming, and video on demand. More recently, the ABC has begun exploring the provision of its radio content by syndication technology, or 'podcasting'. Podcasting allows programs to be downloaded for convenient listening on personal computers or handheld

[64] See Robert Manne (ed.), 2005, *Do Not Disturb: Is the Media Failing Australia*, Melbourne, Black Inc

digital devices. The ABC also tracks the response to these initiatives.[65]

The ABC illustrates how civic engagement via new media is shaped by government policy via public funding and regulation, as well as the provision of broadband infrastructure and pricing. Government policy settings are always central to the development of civic participation, regardless of the channel. While such features as interactive forums and email lists are helpful in disseminating information and providing an element of citizen dialogue, the ABC's efforts in this area have been modest. By comparison, the British Broadcasting Corporation is experimenting with new media and citizen journalism on a much larger and more ambitious scale. It does not seem to be as hampered by politically induced timidity as the ABC. For example, they have run a Citizen Conference, aimed at expanding public inputs to the BBC's activities.

Human rights and electronic surveillance

One of the impacts of ICTs on the health of the Australian democratic system in recent years has been the expanding role of security agencies (either in the form of police organisations, or the intelligence services of the Commonwealth) in overseeing the private lives of Australian citizens. Following the attacks in Bali, London, and the US, and the Australian commitment to war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the fear of domestic attacks by terrorists has encouraged the introduction of a raft of new legal measures that have limited human rights and civil liberties, and extended the capabilities of the security services to place citizens under surveillance (overt and covert).

While these laws are beyond the scope of this analysis, the role of ICTs in this process should be commented upon. This role operates at two levels: direct and indirect, as discussed below.

Declining privacy in electronic communications

The use of ICTs by Australian citizens and residents has been subject to increasing surveillance by the security services since the late 1990s. At this time, the Commonwealth government introduced requirements for service providers (such as internet service providers) to provide increased levels of access to data stored regarding their customers' usage patterns and the content of their communications. The stated objective of these requirements is to allow for 'forensic computing' to be more effectively applied if and when a user becomes subject to a criminal investigation, or as part of an intelligence 'sweep'.

[65] Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2003, 'Long Way To The Top – Live In Concert Interactive Audience Survey Report—Summary Of Findings', http://www.broadcastpapers.com/whitepapers/ABCLongWayTop.pdf

During 1999-2000, it was revealed that this power had been applied on nearly one million occasions.[66] In addition, the year 2000 saw the introduction of the *Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Legislation Amendment Act 1999* which gives the security services the capacity to covertly gain access to computers ('hack') and the authority to modify information held within them. Given public oversight of these agencies is limited (largely reporting back to the government of the day), the concern that covert actions may place incriminating information on a subject's computer remains ever present.

While the Senate rejected expansive powers for wiretapping of mobile telephones in 2002 (in the form of the Telecommunications Interception Legislation Amendment Bill 2002), ongoing pressure by the Coalition government to introduce greater security legislation has seen the power of police and security forces to monitor the electronic communications of Australian citizens increase dramatically. Recently, the *Telecommunications (Interception) Amendment (Stored Communications) Act 2004*, which rapidly passed through Parliament, greatly expanded the capacity for electronic communications to be monitored by the government.

The current political climate in Australia, and government control of the Senate, suggest that ongoing expansion of police and security agencies' powers to intercept electronic communications is likely to continue in the future.

Integrated data: a human rights concern?

A more diffused human rights concern about the use of ICTs by the public service relates to the greater capacity of government departments and agencies to aggregate information held on individual citizens. While this concern is not new,[67] recent developments in computerisation—wide scale computer networking and technologies to assist systems integration—can be seen to have revitalised this tendency in recent years.

While database integration (or post hoc data 'mining') is only at its infancy in the public service, the ongoing drive for efficiency and the development of better service delivery for the community encourage discussions of aggregation. This tendency, driven by new public management concerns about 'whole of government' service delivery and the development of 'citizen-centric' service delivery, is also mirrored by the interest of security services in better means to profile and monitor the behaviour of individuals of interest.

While debate remains at an early stage, discussion by some senior Coalition Ministers over the introduction of a new national identity card incorporating

[66] Brendan Nicholson, 2001, 'Anger at plundered phone records', *The Age*, 4 February

[67] This was discussed in Michael Stone and Malcolm Warner, 1970, *The Databank Society, London*, George Allen & Unwin.

biometric information indicates that some members of the political elite are giving serious consideration to the underlying requirements for an integrated government information system. Once each citizen has a unique identification document, this allows the data held on them in all government databases to be tied together.

The human rights and democratic concerns are real, but unable to be quantified yet. Overall, however, five basic risks should be noted with proposals of this type:

- The capacity to aggregate massive amounts of information on individual citizens, including the most intimate information from social security, education, and health records, could lead to the complete undermining of notions of personal privacy for citizens;
- The expanded intelligence capacity these systems provide police and security services lead to the intensification of a 'surveillance society' where citizens believe, and act on the belief, that they are under surveillance at all times;
- Electronic systems, like their physical counterparts, cannot ever be completely secure, leading to the possibility of misuse of this information by insiders' or 'hackers';[68]
- Information, once entered into the system, becomes impossible to correct or remove, even if entered in error; and
- The possibility that corrupt governments will misuse the system to provide highly focused largesse to individuals or groups in the community with the objective of distorting electoral outcomes. While this may appear fanciful, the effective use of 'preference engines' in closely matching customers with products in the private sector illustrates how effective profiling can be, even with limited amounts of information.[69]

A countervailing view

While these technological applications raise concerns over their use for the surveillance of individual citizens, it should be noted that governments around Australia claim they are a necessary measure to prevent terrorist attacks on Australian soil. The 2005 transit system attacks in the UK and previous attacks in Spain illustrate how police and intelligence services gain value from access to data following an incident, providing for more efficient investigation. However, proactive use of information technology to prevent similar attacks is cited as the most beneficial application of technology in the area of national security.

[68] As was seen in 2004-5 with unauthorised use of the Victorian Police database LEAP (AAP, 2005, 'Police database under fire', *The Australian*, 11 March)

[69] Alex Pham and John Healey, 2005, 'Telling you what you like', *LA Times*, 20 September

Recent government initiatives in this area include:

- A general expansion of, and the growing networking of, surveillance cameras in public places in Australia. At present, most popular public spaces are protected by security cameras, assisting law enforcement and private security firms in monitoring behaviour in these areas. Their use has, however, been much lower in the Australian context than in the UK. This may be due to Australia's federal structure, making co-ordination of placement and management more complex.[70] Following the UK bombings, however, governments around Australia have reached agreement to collaborate on the more systematic deployment of these technologies;
- Experimentation with advanced identity technologies, such as passports with embedded radio tags and biometric information. The advantages of these technologies lie in addressing concerns about 'identity theft' (the use of another person's personal information) and entry into Australia of criminals and individuals associated with terrorism;
- The introduction of new high-speed container x-ray systems to increase the number of imported shipping containers that can be reviewed by the Australian Customs Service;
- The integration of financial institutions into centralised 'data mining' systems to track and monitor the movement of money. This type of data aggregation and pattern recognition can be employed to identify suspicious movements of funds (such as money laundering employed by criminal syndicates or terror cells); and
- The introduction of legislation to permit the electronic tagging of suspects (control orders) to allow their movements (or restriction to home detention) to be automatically monitored. The advantage of electronic tagging comes from the ability to redeploy intelligence and police personnel who would be otherwise tasked with monitoring the movements of these people.

Overall, these applications provide law enforcement and security organisations with two key advantages:

- Efficient use of resources (normally human) through the automation of data capture about individuals or organisations of interest; and
- The ability to mine, aggregate, analyse, and identify data based on specific behavioural profiles associated with specific types of criminal or terrorist activity.

[70] Adam Sutton and Dean Wilson, 2004, 'Open-street CCTV in Australia: The politics of resistance and expansion', *Surveillance & Society*, 2(2/3): 310–322

Given the evolving nature of threats to Australia (in terms of the types of strategies employed by criminals and criminal organisations), these technologies provide a range of advantages in both investigating crimes after the event, and preventing crimes occurring within Australia. While effective investigation will be evident to the wider public, the efficacy of prevention will be difficult to establish, making a balanced assessment of the costs of civil liberties and the benefits from security hard to determine over time.

E-consultation and e-participation

While the discussions have tended to focus on the implicit benefits and risks to Australian democratic life associated with the public service's use of ICTs, one significant area of activity that deserves considerable attention is the direct use of new technologies to provide members of the public with access to the decision making process.

This type of programmatic behaviour, electronic consultation or participation, can be seen as a direct means by which elements of the public service and executive can engage directly with the community or relevant stakeholders to develop policy. These approaches have been employed across the world, but can take a wide variety of forms, including:

- Highly informal, non-binding discussions facilitated online;
- Simple 'electronic suggestion boxes';
- Online collaboration and report development;
- Electronic voting, polling, or plebiscites;
- Structured discussion forums;
- Virtual meetings (audio, and video-conferencing); and
- Planning simulations and games.

In any discussion of these types of initiatives, however, it is important to make a distinction between consultation and participation:

- Consultation is used in this context to include the collection of views or opinions (discretely, or on an ongoing basis) which inform, but do not direct or determine the decisions that are made;
- Participation is used to describe those consultative processes where the

participants have some (complete or partial) ability to influence the outcome of the decision-making process.

A good (but not ICT-enabled) example of this difference can be shown by comparing two consultation processes undertaken in adjacent States:

- In the *Tasmania Together* community consultation processes, discussions were facilitated at the community level, encouraging the development by participants of a set of performance indicators for the Tasmanian government. These indicators (though not without some backsliding) were then promulgated by the government as targets it was committed to reaching;
- In the *Growing Victoria Together* community consultation process, members of the community were consulted over issues of concern and means to address these issues, but did not directly develop policies or targets for implementation.

Activities to date

Given the wide range of forms that e-consultation and e-participation can take, and the tendency for these activities to be introduced, either at government level or specific policy areas, it is difficult to comprehensively catalogue the full range of activities that have been undertaken in Australia. To date, the Australian government has focused on service delivery in its electronic initiatives, rather than on fostering democratic dialogue.[71]

To provide an indication of the democratic impacts of these activities, however, some case examples can be provided:

- Community Builders: In New South Wales, the State government established an online community (information reservoir, discussion list system) for citizens to talk about local community issues, develop local projects or responses, and connect these groups and individuals with peers and members of the public service that can assist;
- Citizenscape: Developed by the Western Australian Government, this provides informational resources similar to Community Builders, and a portal for accessing consultation processes being conducted by WA's departments and agencies. The catalogue itself is not necessarily connected to consultations that are being conducted substantively online, but does provide key contact points for all listed consultation processes in the State.
- Queensland E-Democracy Initiative: Possibly one of the most ambitious e-

[71] Karin Geiselhart, Mary Griffiths and Bronwen Fitzgerald, 2003, 'What lies beyond service delivery—An Australian perspective', *Journal of Political Marketing*, 12 (3 & 4)

democracy initiatives in Australia, the Queensland government's program includes:

  - An online consultation gateway with online discussion on selected consultation topics;
  - Audio streaming of parliamentary sittings via the internet;
  - An electronic petitions process for the parliament; and
  - A specific information and consultation portal site developed for young Queenslanders called Generate.

- Acceptance since 1997 of electronic petitions by the Senate; a practice not yet followed by the House of Representatives
- Council Meeting Webcasting in Wellington Shire: This service provides access to real-time and archived videos of Council meetings. The system, developed to provide greater awareness of and access to Council decision making, allows viewers online to post messages to the Mayor that are responded to at the end of the Council session.
- Brisbane City Council's 'Your Say Online': Based on the successful introduction of citizens reference groups which met physically to discuss policy issues relevant to the Council's operations, the City provides an online discussion forum for residents. Similar online consultation processes have been undertaken in a number of Australian local governments, including Ballarat, Moreland (defunct), Darebin, and LaTrobe.

In addition to these specific projects, the use of ICTs to support 'conventional' consultation processes is increasing over time, with more consultation documentation being made available online, greater openness to receive submissions via electronic mail, and the use—in some areas—of supporting websites that document the process of consultation, provide interim updates and status reports, and solicit more input.

Performance criticisms

While these innovations are quite positive, it should be noted that there are a number of criticisms that have been made of government performance to date. These generally include:

- Limited scope;

- Limited support; and
- 'Phoney' consultation, or consultation on issues of irrelevance.

The first criticism is that Australian governments have been highly conservative in their use of ICTs for public participation. This argument is similar to that presented regarding online voting, but focuses on:

- The limited level of investment made in direct provision of democratic access online compared with investment in online services;
- The small scope of most activities, which tend to be either ad hoc, time limited, or tagged as 'pilots' with no final implementation; and
- The tendency for these systems to be explicitly or implicitly abandoned, rather than systematically reviewed and improved. For example, the Tasmanian Government online discussion list, while still functional, appears to have been abandoned by the public sector managers responsible for it, while Victoria's 'Have Your Say' forum simply disappeared.

The positive impact on Australian democratic life of such initiatives should not, however, be overstated. While they mark a new process of consultation and engagement, the tendency to undertake these activities 'in house', controlled by public servants, and developed in conjunction with the strictures of consultation process manuals, represents a desire to control the engagement process by government to ensure that the process provides access, but does not disrupt the orderly process of policy development.[72]

Governments often establish formal consultation as another 'service', without real commitment to heed or respond to the outcomes. This approach severs the connection between popular concerns and the networks that distribute power and resources. Gingering up participation in the short term via often obscure electronic fora will not satisfy the electorate. In general, Australian agencies and jurisdictions avoid serious reflective discussion with citizens about either how well democracy is working or what is needed to improve its application in Australia.

While this position has merit, it is possible to be excessively cynical. First, while many of the issues under discussion in these fora are unremarkable, it must be recognised that most government is unremarkable, consisting of the day-to-day management of relatively mundane matters. Additionally, governments have been notably reluctant to engage the community on its own turf—i.e. in community fora already developed, rather than purpose-built government websites—the benefits

[72] Patrick Bishop & Lori Anderson, 2004, 'E-government to E-democracy: "high tech" solutions to "no tech" problems', in Peter Chen and Winsome Roberts (eds) *Proceedings of Australian Electronic Governance Conference* 2004, 14-15 April, University of Melbourne

of central government consultation gateways are that they allow:

- The consultation process to be structured in line with the decision making process. Most policy professionals attempt to manage decision making in an orderly manner to ensure balanced attention across a range of issues, not just those of specific interest to a noisy minority. The use of government consultation portals reflects the internal rationality of public sector decision-making processes; and
- By offering a range of issues under a common gateway, promotion of the consultation process can capture a wider audience than if each consultation is constructed as a 'stand alone' system.

Overall, one of the key problems of online consultation is developing a balance between issues that can be 'safely' conducted via online channels—where participants will commit to the orderly process of consultation, rather than walking away to engage in other political strategies to achieve their objectives—and those that are so safe they fail to engage any interest at all. While most public servants would concur that quality is preferable to quantity in consultation processes, the tendency for many online consultation projects or pilots to be abandoned in Australia has been because of a lack of both quantity (numbers of participants) and quality (valuable input). This highlights the significant underinvestment in political education in Australia, a problem that the provision of online discussion systems cannot reasonably be expected to resolve.

Future development

The future of online consultation and participation in Australia remains uncertain. While some jurisdictions (specifically Queensland) have taken firm steps towards entrenching online channels in policy making processes, others have been quite hesitant, or having undertaken some activities, withdrawn quickly following negative outcomes. Like any activity in government, these participatory forums need to provide their effectiveness and value, and online consultation does suffer from low levels of awareness in government and corresponding skill issues. There have been some highly-publicised policy retreats and failures such as the South Australian Government's misplaced policy announcement of the creation of a 'virtual electorate' of expatriate citizens.[73]

While the Commonwealth has not been at the forefront of performance in this area, it should be recognised that the national government, through the Australian Government Information Management Office, has recently:

[73] John Olsen, 2000, 'World first virtual electorate for South Australia' Press Release, 17 August, http://www.southern-cross-group.org/

- Produced a basic training document for public managers preparing or considering the use of ICTs in consultation;[74] and
- Is developing a public sector 'reference group' (professional network-cum-self help society) for public sector employees across all levels of government. As the processes of developing effective online consultation and participation processes are highly dependent on local conditions, stakeholder and policy-issue characteristics, resources, and public interest level, this type of 'capacity building process' may be beneficial in improving take up of ICTs more directly in consultation and participation in the future.

Conclusions and summary

The size of the public sector in Australia makes it difficult to make broad generalisations about the impact of new technologies on democratic outcomes. Some trends, such as the reduction of politically-sensitive content online, or the development of new ICT-enabled security apparatus, suggest that the public sector is relatively complicit in a desire by governments to reduce public debate and human rights. There are numerous examples, however, of policy areas where ICTs are being used to expand the options of individual citizens to participate in an informed and democratic manner.

Whilst the democratic impacts of ICTs within the public service are deep, complex, and intersecting, it is possible to make some broad generalisations.

First, there is a tendency for the public sector's engagement with ICTs and their social application to be positive, particularly in areas where democratic participation is 'covert' or tangential to the overarching policy area of government. Thus, the desire by the Commonwealth to encourage people into broadband technologies is often stated within the rhetoric of developing a modern, efficient information economy that has positive benefits in terms of health and education. The underlying democratic good (greater access to information, new means of participation and political organisation) occurs as a 'spin off' benefit to these programs.

Second, where participation is the stated aim of specific projects, these tend to be currently undertaken (with the exception of the Queensland Government) 'below the waterline' of ministerial awareness. Thus, a number of democratic participation programs, often focused on disadvantaged members of the community, occur well down the organisational chain, where their obscurity isolates them from political concern.

[74] In addition, it is increasingly common for ICT channels to be discussed, at least tangentially, in most central policy manuals on consultation developed by Australian governments.

Finally, given that small scale, isolated projects tend to have small scale and isolated democratic benefits, the future role for the public sector in promoting an 'electronic democracy' agenda must be to move this into a more prominent position. This has been clearly achieved in Queensland, where the State has adopted a range of high-profile activities under the clear patronage of the Premier himself. In other States, and particularly at the Commonwealth level, caution appears to continue to reign, and so the future development of electronic democracy remains uncertain. Clearly if the Queensland experiment appears to bear fruit, other jurisdictions that have either tentatively dabbled or backed away from experiments in the past (Victoria, NSW, South Australia, Western Australia) may, through the process of inter-jurisdictional learning and emulation, develop a more vibrant approach. The outcome remains to be seen.

Strengths
• Publication of policy-related information online, increasing access to information by the wider community. • Policy responses to information gaps such as access gaps, or information literacy barriers. • Experimentation with new democratic services, such as online freedom of information, and ICT-enabled means of public participation and consultation. • The ABC provides a good base line for use of ICTs in public dialogue.
Weaknesses
• More limited experimentation with online consultation than in comparable nations, like Canada or the UK. • Problems associated with regional access to telecommunications infrastructure. • Access to information by those with disabilities and members of non-English speaking communities inhibited by slow development of government accessibility standards and technologies. • Deployment of security technologies, placing increasing numbers of Australians under active or passive surveillance.

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