Interaction between states and citizens in the age of the Internet: 'e-government' in the United States, Britain and the European Union

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> The trouble with the zealots of technology as an instrument of democratic liberation is not their understanding of technology but their grasp of democracy (Barber, 1997: 224)

Governments throughout the developed world have recently embarked upon a new wave of initiatives which draw upon the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The false starts and fragmented projects of the past have now been superseded by the Internet. The arrival of the graphical browser in the early 1990s, and its fast-approaching ubiquity in the early twenty-first century, has caused a paradigm shift. One does not have to subscribe to technological determinism to argue that the interconnectedness facilitated by the Internet far exceeds anything available before. It is more obvious than ever that ICTs are capable of reshaping structures of governance. How this might occur is the subject of this paper.

We argue that there are three basic models of interaction between the state and citizens which may underpin the practice of 'e-government'. Each is an ideal type in the Weberian sense - a heuristic tool for identifying and classifying the main features of a set of phenomena, with a view to rendering complex processes more intelligible and comparable in a way that aids further empirical research (Weber, 1947). Our three categories are not meant to be mirror-images of reality. Rather, they represent the distinctive characteristics of each model of interaction. It is equally important to stress that while in any

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specific case one of the three models is likely to be the dominant form of interaction, all three may intersect and overlap. We seek to establish a critical perspective on the current concern with 'e-government' and assess what is missing from recent proposals in Britain, the United States and the European Union – the gaps and silences which indicate the marginalization of alternative possibilities. First, we sketch out three models of interaction, which we term 'managerial', 'consultative' and 'participatory'. Secondly, using evidence from the United States, Britain and the European Union, we undertake a comparative analysis of recent policy statements on the future role of ICTs in government. We conclude that if current trends continue, the democratic possibilities of the Internet are likely be marginalized as the 'managerial' model of interaction becomes dominant.

The principal features of managerialism can be summarized as follows: a concern with the 'efficient' delivery of government/state information *to* citizens and other groups of 'users'; the use of ICTs to improve flows of information within and around the organs of government; a recognition of the importance of 'service delivery' to 'customers'; the view that speeding up of information provision *is by itself* 'opening up' government; a general absence of user resource issues such as ability to receive and interpret information; and 'control' as the defining logic. In the British case, the managerial use of ICTs has emerged as a strong theme in the Labour administration's obsession with 'joined-up government'. In the United States, the Clinton administration's aim to 'reinvent government' closely followed this managerial path, while in Europe, despite some recognition of more developed democratic potentialities within the governmental deployment of ICTs, most discussion has centered on issues of efficiency and 'service delivery'.

Where do political scientists stand on these issues today? There is a new, but still embryonic, literature on the changes being wrought by the Internet on political parties and pressure groups (Margolis et al, 1997, 1999; Gibson and Ward, 1998; Hill and Hughes, 1998). An established segment of the public policy and administration literature which deals with government use of ICTs

has been around for some time, but these writers are only just beginning to integrate the impact of the Internet into their analyses (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998; Margetts, 1998; Pratchett, 1995, 1999; Dunleavy and Margetts, 2000; Hoff *et al*, 2000). Political scientists are only just getting to grips with how the relations between states and citizens might be reconfigured under the influence of new media. One of the more startling discoveries of Kevin A. Hill and John E. Hughes' survey of Internet activism was that 38.5 per cent of US Internet users gained their political information direct from US government websites (Hill and Hughes, 1998: 44). While this trailed behind national newspaper sites (60.9 per cent), the combined CNN, MSNBC and C-SPAN portals (54.6 per cent) and the major television network news sites – ABC, NBC and CBS (39.1 per cent), the fact that nearly 40 per cent of US citizens might in the near future get their political information direct from a state source is a significant trend.

Three models of interaction

In sketching out the three models of interaction below, we have been influenced by Kenneth C. Laudon's pioneering work of 1977, *Communications Technology and Democratic Participation*. Laudon argued that 'implicit in the development of certain information technologies are very definite models of democracy which differ considerably from one another' (Laudon, 1977: 14). Steering a careful path between technological determinism and over-emphasizing political agency, Laudon maintained that technology 'is a facilitating factor that interacts with existing historical, organizational, and environmental pressures to shape the future.' 'Yet', he wrote, 'it also clear that certain technologies facilitate some goals better than others.' (Laudon, 1977: 19). Laudon developed a threefold typology of technological forms, each of which lent itself to a corresponding form of government. Data transformation technologies such as mainframes and databases were compatible with managerial democracy; mass-participation technologies such as opinion polling and interactive cable TV were suited to populist democracy; and

interactive technologies, which, in 1977, meant telephone conference calls, fitted with a 'pluralist' model of democracy.

Although we make use of some of Laudon's insights, especially his description of 'managerial democracy', it is important to highlight where we differ. First, it is an obvious but significant point that technology has developed considerably since the mid-1970s. Telephone conference calls are being displaced by personal computers linked to the Internet, with its relatively low costs and ease of use. Networked communication is now possible on a much larger scale and revolves around a flexible, easily-defined set of standards and protocols. The emerging ubiquity of the Internet is what makes it a potentially powerful political development, and it is this which has made possible the intersection and overlapping of the three models of interaction we identify. Secondly, Laudon was chiefly concerned with technological forms, while we are concerned with the forms and the discourses that are used by political actors to legitimize their behaviour. Indeed, these may not always converge. Thirdly, in our view Laudon's typology artificially restricted 'mass' participation to one category – 'populism'. Contrary to this, we argue that mass participation is a characteristic of each of the three models we identify. Fourthly, in Laudon's framework, the managerial model was heavily associated with a 'scientifically-trained elite' at the heart of the US federal government, reflecting Daniel Bell's analysis of the post-industrial society and the role of elite technicians (Bell 1974). However, the expertise required to operate ICTs has been significantly reduced in the Internet age. While the design and installation of new systems undoubtedly requires expert knowledge, their daily operation can now be more easily adapted to pre-existing cultures of governance and individual skill levels. Interest in ICT applications in government has spread well beyond the confines of the 'technocracy'. Finally, there have been critical shifts in the values underpinning government in both Britain and the United States since Laudon's work appeared, which can be gathered together under the heading of the 'new public management' (NPM). Whether the advent of the Internet is dismantling the fundamental structures of NPM remains to be seen (Dunleavy

and Margetts, 2000), but it seems certain that the use of ICTs in government since the mid-1990s has been conditioned by changes that Laudon could not have foreseen.

1. Managerial model

- 'efficient' delivery of government/state information *to* citizens and other groups of 'users'/information dissemination
- improving flows of information within and around the state
- 'control' as defining logic
- importance of 'service delivery'
- speeding up of information provision *is* 'opening up' government
- regulatory, law making; responding to the needs of the 'new economy'
- user resource issues (ability to receive and interpret information) largely absent
- unilinear model of information

In the managerial model of interaction ICTs are largely seen as a quantitative improvement on previous technologies. State services will continue as before but will be made more 'efficient', where 'efficiency' means increased speed of delivery combined with a reduction in costs. ICTs remove some of the 'friction' within state bureaucracies which is identified by governments as a major cause of citizen disquiet. Horizontal flows of information will be improved in order to break down unhelpful departmental boundaries and entrenched vertical hierarchies (Bellamy et al, 1995: 93-4).

For example, Don Tapscott suggested that ICTs:

> not only…reduce the costs of government but also radically transform the way government programs are delivered and the very nature of governance. Internetworked [sic] government can overcome the barriers of time and distance to perform the business of government and give people public information and services when and where they want them. Governments can use electronic systems to deliver better-quality products to the public more quickly, cost effectively and conveniently (Tapscott, 1995: 163).

Tapscott saw this as a renewal of established functions rather than an opening up of citizen access. Thus, the 'seven themes of internetworked government' Tapscott outlined were: administrative renewal (faster, more efficient bureaucracies); integrated digital benefits transfer; integrated digital access to government information; government fostered information initiatives (to establish data-banks of social information); intergovernmental tax filing, reporting and payments processing; national (and global) law enforcement and public safety networks; and government/client communication initiatives (Tapscott 1995: 167-175). Although the last category might plausibly include the notion of better communications from citizen to government, the use of the word 'client' indicates the narrowness of Tapscott's perspective. Thus, ICTs will enhance the delivery of services, but the democratic possibilities of such communications were generally ignored.

A key claim is that ICTs will allow for more accurately targeted communication of citizen requests and faster responses. Long-established state objectives - economic development, wealth creation and the maintenance of domestic stability - can be furthered through support and facilitation of the information economy and the enhancement of agencies such as the police, the armed forces, the prison service and the courts. State bureaucracies become information-gatherers and data aggregators. Those with the power of decision over IT procurement in government justify public expenditure on information processing on the grounds that it will improve 'service delivery'.

At the center of the managerial model is a presumption that change is incremental. While ICTs may represent both challenges and opportunities for the practice of states (their interactions with the domestic economy, and more widely civil society), their basic operational logic remains unaltered. The state's role in the economy is largely unchanged: continuing the neo-liberal hegemony of recent times in much of Western Europe and the United States, the state remains a non-interventionist facilitator of private economic life. The information economy, while changing the types of regulation required (though

often merely requiring the expansion of certain regulations into new, technologically-defined areas of economic interaction) does not require a radical rethinking of state activity.

The managerial model treats information as relatively simple and unilinear rather than complex and discursively generated. Information can be 'delivered' and will empower those previously unable to access it. The state is regarded as the authoritative source of information in society. Indeed, it may marginalize alternative providers of information, while seeking to establish certain meanings, certain agendas as 'common-sense' and legitimate. Accessibility, not least of all the skills required to sift and comprehend publicly-available information, are perceived as secondary, 'technical' issues. This a 'push' model of information dissemination; the state will place information in accessible forums and the onus is on the user to access it. The audience are seen as passive recipients rather than interlocutors. State-produced information is here a passive resource to be transferred between nodes in the information network. And while citizens are inescapably part of e-government networks, their role is not as important as the state, which *manages* the activity. Cyberspace becomes 'normalized' into the routines of 'politics as usual' (Margolis et al, 1997, 1999).

2. Consultative model

- polling, access of voters and other interested parties to government, representation of views, advisory referendums
- 'push-button democracy', 'e-voting' - direct democracy - instantaneous opinion polling
- access as a technical issue - problems of self-selection of citizen respondents
- direct and unmediated contact between citizen and state
- 'electronic town meetings'
- agenda framing as critical issue
- technological lag among citizens and their representatives
- unilinear model of information

In direct contrast, this is a 'pull' model. Here ICTs facilitate the communication of citizen opinion *to* the government. Information is regarded as a resource

which can be used to provide 'better' government. By utilizing the speed of ICT networks governments can seek voter opinion on particular issues to guide policy making. Stress is laid on the ability of political and administrative elites to discover and be advised of what 'real people' think. The consultative model is sometimes presented as facilitating direct access to government, unmediated by 'special interest' groups which distort communication, but it is equally compatible with a group-based approach to politics.

This model contains some recognition of how scarcity of resources determines access *to* government. Consequently, publicly available computers in libraries and feedback 'booths' in public spaces are a crucial element in the desire to establish links between government and citizen, of which Santa Monica's Public Electronic Network is an early (though not fully developed) example. This approach fits in with established practices such as focus group consultations and opinion polling but aims to increase the sample size to ensure more representative views. Much is made of instant referendums, electronic voting, and the possibility of continuous democracy. This has led to several experiments in America, Australia and Britain with 'electronic town halls' or time limited consultations on single issues.

In its more critical manifestations, the consultative model of interaction recognizes certain endemic problems with the state-citizen relationship. By virtue of the uneven availability of up-to-date technology, those who vote in consultative forums, and who contact the government with their views, may be self-selected, ICT-literate groups whose views and prejudices may not be representative of the citizenry as a whole. Indeed, the ability to use technology in the manner proposed may be unevenly spread through government itself as well as civil society. There are also the common problems of direct democracy – notably the difficulty of framing policy alternatives in ways which will solicit broadly comparable (and informed) responses. Agenda management presents a major problem: both government and organized groups may be able to mobilize electronic campaigns to further their own aims, or may only seek consultation in certain policy areas or with

certain groups. Indeed, it becomes possible for government to poll relatively small sections of the electorate and, in turn, 'narrowcast' information back. Government may be able to define the interests of a particular group in a particular way, and keep that strategy hidden from other potentially affected interests (Abramson et al, 1988: 49-54; Van De Donk et al, 1995: 24).

As with the managerial model, information is regarded as a passive resource. Indeed, frequently the consultative model may only allow inputs which fit within the parameters already set by policy makers. Opinions which question the basis of policy making itself may be regarded as 'ill-informed' or 'ideologically-driven'. Communication by direct question-asking activity is based on the need to generate quantifiable and comparable responses to particular policy innovations.

3. Participatory model

- civil society exists away from the state and (will be) mediated electronically
- organic emergence of democracy
- voluntary associations, spontaneous interactions within cyber-space
- access is enough to encourage wider political participation
- state protects free speech and rights of expression
- participatory model will replace the other two through the *logic* of information society
- discursive model of information

While the first two models of interaction stress the vertical flows of state-citizen communication, the participatory model conceives of a more complex, multi-directional interactivity. It assumes that while the state may facilitate political discussion and interaction, much of civil society exists away from a state which is but one association among many. Other sites of political discourse and interaction have emerged (and will continue to emerge) even though the state may remain the principal target of organized political action. One of the most wide-ranging descriptions of this model came in 1980 from Yoneji Masuda (Masuda 1980 [1990]: 81-87). Widespread participation, it was argued, could act as a break on the dissemination of misleading

information by the state and large corporations. In a precursor to the claims made for open-source software such as the Linux operating system, the greater the number of individuals involved in the management of the system *through* participation, the less likely it was that information could be captured by monopoly interests.

This model contains a recognition that knowledge is discursive, contingent and changeable - that it emerges through interaction. It has obvious 'utopian' leanings, and many accounts of cyber politics rest upon optimistic assumptions. At the same time, however, advocacy of an active civil society need not rest upon a desire to sweep away representative structures. The explosion of interest in 'social capital' during the last ten years has demonstrated how these themes may enter the political mainstream, often in tandem with an argument about the role of the Internet in producing that elusive resource (Putnam, 1994, 2000; Rich, 1999). In the UK, a useful example of this model in action was the Hansard Society's on-line discussion of domestic violence policy, which involved over 200 women in interactive discussion. Many had never used the Internet before, and had accessed the Internet through women's refuges or public libraries (Hansard Society, 2000). And while there were a number of problems with the Public Electronic Network in Santa Monica, during the early 1980s it did open up a space for the homeless to organize and find an effective political voice in a mostly affluent community not attuned to their interests (Schalken 2000: 154-168; Schmitz 1997: 87ff).

In the participatory model interaction is regarded as constitutive of democracy itself. Opinion formation and political action based on forums, groups or new 'virtual communities' enlivens and furthers the development of civil society (Rheingold, 1993). The principal focus is on voluntary association and the development of new communities of interest. It identifies the proliferation of Usenet, bulletin boards, chat-rooms, file sharing and peer-to-peer networking as positive and organic deliberative mechanisms. Importantly, the state will still have to protect liberal-democratic values of free speech and expression

that might otherwise be disregarded. It must also assist through infrastructural provision and regulation.

This model often reflects optimism about the ability of users to form voluntary associations and is essentially wary of organizational attempts by the state to create them from above. Rather it reflects the assertion that 'access is enough' and that once on-line citizens will be able to make use of the information available from non-state sources to bring pressure to bear on government. Furthermore, eventually all ICT-mediated interactions will help to build a new cyber-civil society, which enhances the participatory potential for all citizens. This model therefore sees the current limited set of interactions (typified by the first two models above) as characteristic of a period of transition: the real cyber-society will be participatory in its logic and practice, despite the resistance that may be encountered initially.

A more gloomy prognosis, but one which still holds to the central tenets of this model, views the characteristic trends of post-industrial democracies – fragmentation and single issue politics - as undergoing a process of intensification under the weight of new information networks. But while the 'accelerated pluralism' identified by Bruce Bimber could never be characterized as utopia, it still rests upon the view that popular participation in groups, as citizens come together to assert their demands, is made possible in new and different ways by the Internet. Even if on-line citizen campaigns will occur infrequently, and be dominated by those with sufficient resources to mobilize, it is possible to translate R. D. Arnold's theory of potential information, used to explain the behavior of members of the US Congress, and argue that increasing the pool of publicly-available information will force political elites to bow to the pressure of *potential* citizen awareness (Arnold, 1990). As Bimber puts it:

> The result may be a political system in which issues develop and
> move more quickly because of the quicker cycle of mobilization
> and response, and in which government officials increasingly hear

from and respond to new kinds of groups – those without large, stable memberships or affiliations with established institutions.' (Bimber, 1998)

The evolution of 'e-government'

Having sketched out three possible models of interaction, we now turn to an illustrative discussion of the development of the e-government agendas in the United States, Britain and the European Union. In each case we focus on the key policy statements which have defined the dominant approach.

The United States

In the United States, the Clinton-Gore administration made many appeals to the transformative power of information technology. In the summer of 2000, the federal government launched the first government 'portal' of its kind, though at the time of writing it represents little more than a Yahoo-style directory rather than the more ambitious government 'gateway' US citizens have been promised. Nevertheless, integrating the gargantuan amount of information, with the emphasis on individual transactions with government, is the culmination of a process which began with the National Performance Review (NPR) of 1993. The application of ICTs was at the heart of the NPR, and its descendant, the National Partnership for Reinventing Government's *AccessAmerica* program of 1997. Both were co-ordinated by the Office of the Vice President. A long-term believer in the benefits of ICTs, who claims to have invented the term 'information superhighway', Al Gore was quick to emphasize how ICTs could be harnessed to the broader objectives of cost-cutting and increases in productivity. Several 'accompanying reports' appeared alongside the main NPR report, and ICTs were considered important enough to warrant this special treatment (National Performance Review (US) (1993b).

It is ironic, but understandable, that the first NPR report contains very little discussion of the Internet. The Internet was only just beginning to capture the political imagination, and was still the preserve of the military, universities and the IT industry. Gore made up for this with the 1997 update on the NPR and *AccessAmerica* (National Partnership for Reinventing Government (US), 1997). Both were unambiguous in their view that the Internet could be used to 'reengineer' the relationship between government and citizens. The aims of the main NPR report of 1993 were explicit:

> Our goal is to make the entire federal government both less expensive and more efficient, and to change the culture of our national bureaucracy away from complacency and entitlement toward initiative and empowerment. We intend to redesign, to reinvent, to reinvigorate the entire national government. . . We need a federal government that treats its taxpayers as if they were customers and treats taxpayer dollars with the respect for the sweat and sacrifice that earned them. (National Performance Review, 1993a: Introduction, paras 1 and 10)

Existing government ICTs could be modernized in ways that would allow their inherent properties to be used more intensively. Increased automation was the order of the day: 'As everyone knows', it stated, 'the computer revolution allows us to do things faster and more cheaply than we ever have before. . . [B]y simplifying paperwork and reducing administrative costs, we expect to save $3.3 billion over 5 years in the cost of administering grant programs to state and local governments.' (National Performance Review (US), 1993a: Preface). But the emulation of private sector management practices was also at the forefront of the program. Government in the 'Information Age', as the report termed it, must adapt in the way that large, vertically-organized corporate bureaucracies had been forced to adapt. The creation of 'entrepreneurial organizations' was dependent upon new working practices. Assisted by the development of ICTs, the aim was to create customer-focused public bureaucracies.

In a moment of clarity, the NPR entered into a potentially radical discussion of the difference between customers and citizens, only to shelve its implications for the remainder of the report, and, indeed, for all such reports since:

> By 'customer' we do not mean 'citizen.' A citizen can participate in democratic decision-making; a customer receives benefits from a specific service. All Americans are citizens. Most are also customers. . . In a democracy, citizens and customers both matter. But when they vote, citizens seldom have much chance to influence the behavior of public institutions that directly affect their lives: schools, hospitals, farm service agencies, social security offices. It is a sad irony: citizens own their government, but private businesses they do not own work much harder to cater to their needs. (National Performance Review (US), 1993a: Section Five, paras 10-11).

Like other statements of this kind, this can be interpreted as a classic piece of NPM sloganeering. It may even be seen as a typical new right critique of the flaws of state intervention. But one of the important implications of the Internet is that it allows interaction between citizens and political elites across the whole government apparatus, not just the legislative branch. This points to a new and different relationship between public bureaucracies and those whom they serve. In the consultative and participatory models outlined above, citizens are able *to be citizens*, not just consumers, in their interactions with the executive branch. They are able to augment the tasks of scrutiny and accountability performed by legislatures. But in one swift move the implications of this distinction were buried.

Individuals were to have influence over government services as customers but not as citizens. The managerial model, with its accommodation of customer feedback as a means of improving government, was positioned at the center of the NPR. It could have been possible to discuss mechanisms

beyond the customer service approach, which might have involved citizens *as citizens* using ICTs to influence policy and service delivery, but this was not considered appropriate by the NPR. The following benefits were offered instead:

> Electronic government overcomes the barriers of time and distance to perform the business of government and give people public information and services when and where they want them. It can swiftly transfer funds, answer questions, collect and validate data, and keep information flowing smoothly within and outside government (National Performance Review, 1993b: Executive Summary, para 10).

In a model that was to find similar expression in Britain, the NPR established the idea of 'virtual agencies' as a means of co-ordinating efforts across a large and rambling administrative machine. In future, customers would not need to have knowledge of the structure of government, but would instead be able to transact on the basis of a number of clearly-identifiable 'service themes' (National Performance Review, 1993b: Section IT01, para 16). These would be based on intuitively-expressed customer demand rather than the producer-driven needs of the agency. Customers would transact with several different agencies without realizing it, while those agencies involved would find it easier to share information and make decisions.

How would customers transact with government? The benefits system, which includes the administration of food stamps, unemployment benefit, Medicare, Medicaid, child support and related social security benefits, would shift to a system of electronic transfer. Customer inquiries would be automated or handled more efficiently through the use of call-centers and one-stop shops. Individuals would file their tax returns on-line. Electronic kiosks would be placed in benefits offices and other public buildings, allowing access to government information sites and the submission of electronic forms. Email use would be expanded across the federal government. A national network

for 'law enforcement' and 'public safety' would be established to enable communication within the criminal justice system and emergency services. Businesses would be able to use a new database on international trade. 'Homebuyers' would consult a new environmental database (National Performance Review, 1993b).

It was perhaps understandable that citizen-government interaction, in the form of the consultative and participatory models we identified earlier, should be underplayed in the 1993 report. However, the ways in which these issues were originally framed went on to have a decisive influence long after the popularization of the Internet. Much that had been proposed was close to being achieved by 1997. Most notable was the establishment of the foundations of an electronic benefits transfer system. By this time, Internet usage had exploded in the United States, assisted by the reduction in costs achieved by the 1996 Telecommunications Act. But the main difference between the Internet and prior technologies - its relatively low costs, ease of access/use, potential for interaction and its fast-approaching ubiquity - were the report's major blind spots (National Partnership for Reinventing Government (US), 1997). Although acknowledgements of the Internet's simplifying logic had taken place, with the establishment of a new White House site, a new emphasis on Internet-based customer interfaces for the retrieval of information held in databases and the role of e-commerce in public procurement, the overall design was strikingly similar to the essentially pre-Internet report of 1993. Despite the 'explosive use and capacity' of the Internet, the 'highlights' of *AccessAmerica* were the following:

- Seniors will provide facts just once to cover Medicare and all pension programs; payment will, of course, be directed to their account, accessed by a single card that they carry in their wallet or purse.
- Police on the street will get electronic fingerprint checks and criminal records while suspects are in their grasp, not weeks later.
- Parents will check environmental conditions around town before picking out a new house.

- Students will make their application for loans, get their answers, and if approved, receive their funds on-line.

- Communities will seek grants, apply for permits, and file reports electronically.

- Companies seeking export markets for their products will go on-line to a one-stop government shop for export assistance.

- And behind the scenes for all these transactions, the government will be operating an electronic system that, compared to (*sic.*) today's paper-based services, improves privacy and security for individuals (National Partnership for Reinventing Government, 1997: Introduction, para 12).

A theme present in the 1993 report – the need for co-ordination across government – was brought to the forefront of *AccessAmerica* with plans for a new Government Services Information Infrastructure (GSII). Developed by the Government Information Technology Services board (GITS), the GSII is a low-key variation of the intranet concept (National Partnership for Reinventing Government, 1997: Section A15, para 4). It is designed to allow cross-agency collaboration between groups of workers. As we shall see below, the British government took up this idea and developed it more fully.

Progress on the targets set by *AccessAmerica* appears to have been slower than expected. As a consequence, Clinton issued an executive memorandum in December 1999, calling upon agency heads to accelerate and intensify the use of ICTs. Of particular concern was the failure to introduce co-ordinating mechanisms that would make it easier for customers to access services irrespective of the originating agency - a principle which found expression in the *FirstGov* portal, launched in September 2000 (National Partnership for Reinventing Government, 2000). *FirstGov* is at once significant and unremarkable. The portal concept, which was seen as the holy grail for the private Internet sector in the mid-1990s, is now commonplace. There is, therefore, little novelty in applying this concept to government websites. However, the *FirstGov* approach, and its corresponding project in the UK,

which we discuss below, constitutes an intensification of managerialism. It is without doubt the nearest any government has got to presenting an easily navigable interface to public services, with a distinct emphasis on the individual consumer. Each of the ways in which it is possible to transact with government is laid out in celebratory list fashion, with four organizing sections: 'Shop Online', 'Apply, File, Register Or Print Forms Online', 'Check Performance Online' and 'Let the Government Know'. The last of these encourages customer-type feedback, but even this is qualified by the statement that 'we are unable at this time to respond directly to any emails.' (*FirstGov*, 2000). *FirstGov* is more important for what it represents in the broadest sense - the ubiquity of the Internet and its associated protocols, file formats and 'look and feel' as a medium.

Britain

The NPR's framing of ICTs in terms of their contribution to 'service delivery' and little else has had a profound impact upon developments in the US and beyond, but especially in Britain. The US government was a good five years ahead of the UK when it came to positioning ICTs at the center of a concern to energize public administration.

In Britain, the Labour government claims that it is developing a 'new' approach to state-citizen interaction. In fact it owes much to the previous Conservative government's green paper of November 1996 – *Government Direct*. This explicitly framed the approach in managerial terms when it set out three basic aims: 'to provide better and more efficient services to business and to citizens; improve the efficiency and openness of government administration, and secure substantial cost savings for the taxpayer' (Central Information Technology Unit, 1996: para 4.1). As with the US NPR report of 1993, the new form of state-citizen interaction was to be based on the following: 'providing information, collecting taxes, granting licenses, administering regulations, paying grants and benefits, collecting and analyzing statistics, and procuring goods and services.' (Central Information

Technology Unit, 1996: para 1.4). The Conservatives' green paper was also a primary definer of a peculiar, but strategic, conflation of the terms 'citizen', 'business' and 'customer'. In an interesting formulation, which is at the center of the managerialism we identify, it spoke of the aim 'to make electronic direct delivery of services the preferred option for the majority of government's customers (both citizens and businesses).' (Central Information Technology Unit, 1996: para 5.2) 'Citizens' and 'businesses' both become 'consumers' of government services.

Several of the dominant themes of NPM were in evidence, notably the need for 'efficiency through rationalization' and cost-cutting, but these existed in tension with optimistic statements about the potential for ICTs to provide 'extra connections', coherence and co-ordination across government. Government emerges as an important provider of information - mainly to companies, although the Major government's 'Citizen's Charter' program, designed to make public service providers more accountable, had obvious affinities with the new medium of the Internet. (Central Information Technology Unit, 1996: paras 6.12-6.18). Only one sentence in the whole document (which runs to some thirty-eight pages in the downloadable version) makes direct mention of how ICTs might provide for greater citizen influence on policy-making: 'Email will also make it easier for people to contribute views to the policy-making process'. (Central Information Technology Unit, 1996: para 9.4). Elsewhere the dominant discourse remains managerial.

When Labour came to power, most of the Conservatives' plans were incorporated into the *Modernizing Government* white paper of early 1999. There were important shifts in emphasis, as themes such as 'joined-up government' became central to the new vision (though even that can be found in the older proposals). But the dominant theme of individual consumers and 'business' benefiting from improved service delivery was retained. Again, the principal framework of the white paper is established by an emphasis on 'modernization', 'efficiency' and 'quality':

This Government believes in the public service and public servants. But that does not mean the public service at any price. The British public has grown accustomed to consumer choice and competition in the private sector. If our public service is to survive and thrive, it must match the best in its ability to innovate, to share good ideas, and to control costs, Above all, the public service must deliver efficiently and effectively the policies, programs and services of government. (Cabinet Office (UK), 1999: section 4, para 1)

The key aim here was for government to emulate those private sector practices which involve innovative use of ICTs in information and 'knowledge management'. Government becomes a 'learning organization' (Cabinet Office (UK), 1999: section 5, para 2). Internet and internal networking technologies, such as the Government Secure Intranet (GSI) have the potential to integrate a diverse range of information sources and improve the 'business of government' by bringing departments together in 'on-line meetings and discussion groups' (Central Information Technology Unit, Cabinet Office (UK) 2000b: 21). It is not without significance that the UK Government's proposed definition of e-commerce, submitted to the OECD's definition working group, includes both private and public sector transactions (Performance and Innovation Unit (UK), 1999: section 3, para 4).

In the section on Information Age Government, which discusses the uses to which information technologies might be put, the following list appears:

IT will:
- make it easier for business and individuals to deal with government.
- enable government to offer services and information through new media like the Internet or interactive TV.

- improve communications between different parts of government so that people do not have to be asked repeatedly for the same information by different service providers.

- give staff at call centers and other offices better access to information so that they can deal with members of the public more efficiently and more helpfully.

- make it much easier for different parts of government to work in partnership: central government with local authorities or the voluntary sector; or government with third party delivery channels such as the Post Office or private sector companies.

- help government to become a learning organization by improving our access to, and organization of, information. (Cabinet Office (UK), 1999, section 5, para 5).

With the possible and partial exception of the last category of benefits, these all stand squarely within the managerial model of interaction. The last point hints at some consultation, but still regards information as being 'accessed', rather than developed through deliberation. Businesses and citizens as consumers will, by 2002, be able to 'transact' with government in a number of ways: they will book driving tests, look for employment, submit tax returns, get advice about benefits and health, use the new National Grid for Learning, apply for career development loans and grants, and receive payments from government for 'the supply of goods and services'. (Cabinet Office (UK), 1999, section 5, para 11). But citizens as political participants will be able to do very little. They hardly appear in the white paper. Indeed, the role of research and assessment is accorded considerably more weight in the section on policy making than any attempts to use ICTs to consult with citizens. And nowhere do attempts to consult directly with the public through electronic networks appear as a path of possible development. While such developments as the People's Panel (a 5,000 strong representative group regularly polled by MORI on behalf of government) (Cabinet Office (UK), 1999, section 3, para 7) may look like a move in the direction of participatory models of interaction, the characterization of its members as 'customers' of

public services is significant, as is the fact that none of the People's Panel consultations have occurred via the Internet.

By the time of *E-Government* – the most coherent statement to date, it proved relatively straightforward to frame ICT applications in terms of 'better services for citizens and businesses and more effective use of the Government's information resources'… along with 'the application of e-business methods throughout the public sector' (Central Information Technology Unit, Cabinet Office (UK), 2000b: 1). There are merely two rather vague references to consultative and participatory possibilities (in a document which runs to thirty-four pages). There will be 'greater democratic participation and openness' (Central Information Technology Unit, Cabinet Office (UK), 2000b: 6) and a 'better informed and more participative democracy through electronic consultation and better responses to feedback' (Central Information Technology Unit, Cabinet Office (UK), 2000b: 8). The mechanisms through which this might be achieved are left undefined. This stands in stark contrast to the relatively detailed proposals for interaction with 'business'.

The vision of electronic service delivery as a fusion of public and private within the *Modernizing Government* white paper appears to have been overlooked by many when it first appeared. It was blandly stated: 'We are talking to banks, the Post Office, supermarkets, accountants, interactive broadcasting companies, the information technology industry and others about how they can be partners in service delivery'. This turns out to have been a crucial foundation of the government's plans to develop a multi-purpose portal designed to integrate departments and services and present a unified, user-friendly 'front-end' accessible by various means, including interactive digital television, public kiosks and WAP or GPRS mobile devices (Central Information Technology Unit, Cabinet Office (UK) 1999; 2000b). The UK government lags behind both the private sector and the United States federal government in its development of the portal concept. While the US *FirstGov* site went live in September 2000, the UK launched a scaled-down test version, *UKonline*, in December 2000, developed in partnership with BT

(Cabinet Office (UK) Press Office, 2000). Matters were not helped by the resignation of the 'e-envoy', Alex Allan, in early September 2000. Yet the portal concept retains its centrality as a means of simplifying user access and providing virtual 'joined-up government'.

This strategy has been made more achievable through the 'interoperability' brought about by the use of eXtensible Markup Language (XML) – a new way of handling data which enables cross-platform integration within government and less troublesome integration with the wider Internet (Central Information Technology Unit, Cabinet Office (UK), 2000c; Hewitt, 2000; McGill, 2000). The adoption of XML is a firm indication of the paradigm shift in the use of ICTs by governments, since it acknowledges that the web-browser and the Internet, with their associated standards, protocols and file formats, brought together under the umbrella of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), should form the foundation of government ICT policy for the foreseeable future. CITU's documentation on interoperability makes it explicit, for the first time in British government, that the most popular ways of transferring data across the Internet – from graphics to video and sound – should be used by government from now on. The days of byzantine tailor-made systems which rapidly outdate are perhaps coming to an end. One of the reasons why the marginalization of alternatives is to be taken seriously is due to the fact that the possibility of easily adapting technology to energize citizenship is now within the grasp of most developed states.

The likely fusion of public and private, represented by the all-purpose portal, makes it even more likely that the managerial model as we define it will continue to be dominant. It might be objected that managerialism does not involve a consumer-driven approach, but this is not necessarily the case. As Christopher Pollitt's study demonstrates, it is the combination of internal organizational efficiency combined with a 'customer focus' which most often characterizes contemporary managerialism (Pollitt, 1993). We could add to this concoction the recognition by governments throughout the world that the increasing importance of the Internet requires new media management

strategies in order to control the content published on behalf of government. This concern features prominently in the 1999 *Portal Feasibility Study*, carried out for CITU by PA Consulting, a multinational 'management, systems and technology consultancy' (Central Information Technology Unit, Cabinet Office (UK) 1999). In the UK, the recent relaunch of the prime minister's site can be seen as a direct response to the notable success of the Clinton Presidency's personalized approach to the White House website, one of the most popular federal government sites.

As British government comes to depend more and more on commercial interests, not only for the technological infrastructure, but also the *content* and 'branding' of its Internet presence, and as the media management strategies which have intensified over the last ten years in liberal democracies spill over (albeit in different forms) to the Internet, the space for political innovations along the lines of the consultative and participatory models we identify will inevitably be squeezed.

The European Union

The US-Britain axis has undoubtedly led the way in e-government (with some parallel developments in Australia), but the European Commission has also taken an interest. Certainly, there are some difficulties involved in a comparison between national policy initiatives and those emanating from a supranational entity such as the EU. Nevertheless, we consider it important to include the European dimension not only because these developments have important domestic policy implications for all member states, but also because the EU is currently working towards the integration of the ICT networks of member states with its own structures under the TESTA II initiative (*Trans-European Services for Telematics Between Administrations*). It is anticipated that the British government's Intranet will be connected to the TESTA network, for example. (Central Information Technology Unit, Cabinet Office (UK), 2000b: 22).

European initiatives on ICTs have been greatly influenced by the report from the High-Level Group on the Information Society (chaired by Martin Bangemann), delivered to the European Council in 1994 (and unanimously adopted). Stressing the market driven character of the information economy, the Bangemann Report listed 'ten applications to launch the information society': teleworking; distance learning; a network for universities and research centers; telematic services for small and medium sized enterprises; road traffic management; air traffic control; healthcare networks; electronic tendering; a trans-european administration network; and city-information highways (European Council 1994). Not only does it make little mention of democracy, the report quite explicitly 'urges the European Union to put its faith in market mechanisms as the motive power to carry us into the Information Age' (European Council 1994: 2). It also silenced, through exclusion, labor unions, cultural and academic institutions and social movements among others (Kaitatzi-Whitlock 2000: 53-54). Where member states' governments or the Union's own agencies appear, they are regarded as service providers to the private sector, and despite some moves away from such a business oriented agenda, the report largely set the parameters of early debates at the EU level.

In February 1995 the European Commission convened the advisory Information Society Forum (ISF) (Information Society Forum 1996: 2). Despite the Forum's first annual report being entitled 'Networks for People and their Communities', of the working groups involved only II (basic social and democratic values in the 'virtual community') and III (the influence on public services) touched on issues of direct relevance to the development of e-government. Even then, group III focused exclusively on issues of access to public information (reflecting a managerial model of relations between citizen and the state), leaving group II to consider the 'improvement of democratic structures'. This concluded that 'the development of networks and operating systems must ensure all citizens, regardless of geography, social or economic status, have the opportunity to *participate by providing basic services* which address the needs of all sections of society' (Information Society Forum 1996:

working group 2, report summary, emphasis added). The unusual notion that (democratic) participation merely involves the consumption of services (again) firmly locates the working group's position within our managerial model.

By the next ISF annual report, the working groups had been reconfigured, but their scope remained narrow. Group II had evaporated, while group III was renamed 'Bringing the administration closer to the citizens' (working group V) (Information Society Forum 1997). The latter now focused on universal service and 'vital information'. While making an extensive set of proposals for how EU governments could develop the electronic links between state and citizen, the group was entirely concerned with the access to information and ensuring the barriers to provision are reduced. Although this includes some hints regarding freedom of information, any notion that ICTs might be used to enhance democratic deliberation or accountability is absent (Information Society Forum 1997: 41-50). This gap was also evident in the European Ministerial Conference's declaration appended to the report. Of the 68 interlinked (and numbered) statements, only one (number five) makes mention of democracy: 'Global Information Networks contribute to democracy by improving communication between citizens and their administrations and *facilitating active participation in the democratic process*' (Information Society Forum 1997: 62, emphasis added). The Ministers meeting in Bonn in July 1997 was mainly occupied with the promotion of the information economy and its support services. More worrying was the lack of interest in the democratic potential of ICTs in the 'User's declaration' also appended to this report. Here 'participation' is assumed to be participation in the market and economic relations, not in politics. While governmental efficiency and service delivery are highlighted, these users, at least, seem to have no interest in democratic deliberation (Information Society Forum 1997: 69-73).

The dominant emphasis on the information economy is also evident in the only Green Paper from the Commission to (indirectly) consider e-government. Although it largely focuses on accessing and using public sector information, the paper also includes one short section on 'Electronic Government'

(European Commission 1998: chapter II). Within this subsection the paper delimits three main functions: Information services to retrieve sorted and classified information on demand; Communication services to interact with individuals (private or corporate) or groups of people (e.g. via e-mail or discussion forums); Transaction services to acquire products or services on line or to submit data (e.g. government forms, voting) (European Commission 1998: chapter II). Leaving aside the notion that voting is merely a form of data submission, it is implied that ICTs might be used for citizen-government interactions that expand on mere information delivery and retrieval. But in the short discussion of transaction services the report returns to an emphasis on form submissions and the accessibility of public information. In its response to the Green Paper, the ISF notes its desire to ensure access to 'vital information', which lies at the center of its declarations regarding the construction of an 'informed democracy' (see for instance Information Society Forum 1998a; 1998b). However, the response makes no significant intervention regarding the provision and expansion of the transaction services which would most likely start to deliver a more developed form of e-democracy (Information Society Forum 1999b).

The underlying reason for the ISF's reticence was finally made explicit in its most recent annual report:

> The ISF supports experiments and applications which extend the potential of electronic media to further citizens' democratic involvement in our political systems and the information society more generally. However, it recognizes that unless and until there is more widespread access and the demography of that access is better understood, these *cannot be understood to be properly representative* (Information Society Forum 1999a: 21, emphasis added).

Overall, this leads the ISF to stress a civil rights approach to information access and democracy. Information needs to be conceived of as a 'public

good', allowing citizens unrestricted access to 'vital information'. Having continually stressed the 'European Way' to an information society, the report concludes that the ISF

> considers "politics" as the empowerment of citizens to organize and influence affairs according to mutually acceptable ethical principles. This is, for citizens, the guardian of collective interests, including welfare and the social values of democracy... [T]he European Way implies the primacy of politics - the art of striking a balance among *all* the people's interests - over economics alone (Information Society Forum 1999a: 45).

But it remains to be seen whether this latter-day reintegration of democratic issues into the forum's ideas about an information society will be enough to shift actual practices away from a purely managerial model.

The ISF is not the only group considering the possibilities of e-government. Elsewhere in Brussels, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Industrial Relations and Social Affairs convened a high-level expert group in 1995 to consider the implications of the information society. Dominated by academics, (including Manual Castells, Chris Freeman and Luc Soete, all of whom had been writing about the impact of ICTs for some time) this group delivered its final report in April 1997 (European Commission 1997). Given that the group was reporting to this Directorate-General, it is not surprising that it emphasized the notion of an information *economy*. However, it does include a final (twelfth) set of policy recommendations on the theme of 'Transparency and Democracy'. Issues of service provision and access crop up elsewhere in the report's recommendations but in the final section the group turned to 'maintaining pluralism' and 'A democracy project' for the European Union. Although this initially takes the form of concerns over media ownership and control, the authors also stressed that access to information is not only uneven but it is not *sufficient* for the immediate development of a

participatory democracy. This led the group to offer a final set of policy recommendations:

> To strengthen democratic development within the IS [information society] the EU should implement a democracy project. The objectives would be to reveal how ICTs can:
> - step up the interaction between politicians and citizens and increase the latter's participation in political debate and decision-making;
> - clarify how issues relating to human rights, xenophobia, social values, etc. should be approached in the IS;
> - improve our understanding and the transparency of the democratic process in both national and EU institutions (European Commission 1997: 51/52).

Despite being the last recommendation of the report, this putative democracy project finally reveals an imagination of e-democracy beyond the largely managerial suggestions that had typified the EU's policy.

Building on this recommendation, the European Commission recently called for *eEurope: An Information Society for All*' (European Commission, 1999). Managerialism remains dominant, but is at least no longer the only aspect of e-government to be included. There are references to the need to go 'beyond simply publishing legislation and white papers on the web' and to 'establish a discussion and feedback forum' (European Commission 1999: 16). But while overall the Commission's document represents a hybrid mix of managerial and consultative models, it remains managerial in most aspects. As we would expect, it focuses clearly on the 'new economy' and global competitiveness (European Commission, 1999: 6). As we have argued, this notion of facilitating the 'new economy' is central to the managerial model. In the latest update on the *e*Europe strategy, any concern for e-democracy has entirely evaporated, leaving a wide range of e-commerce and regulatory activities as the exclusive thrust of the project (European Commission 2000). Member

governments have reproduced the same lacunae regarding participatory democratic models of information society evident in the reports from the ISF we have discussed above. The newly constituted Information Society Directorate-General has yet to examine these issues, though a number of reports have been issued on telecoms regulation, and intellectual property. As in America and Britain, the managerial model of e-government is the focus for activities, and other possibilities are ignored or rendered invisible.

Conclusions

Given the diverse range of interactive behavior now made possible by ICTs, the absence of the principal features of the consultative and participatory models in current proposals is striking. Policy on e-government in the US, Britain and the EU is severely limited. From the idea that democratic participation is merely the consumption of services to the extraordinary notion that voting is a form of information submission, democracy itself is being sold short. It represents a marginal aspect of governments' plans for the information society.

There are, of course, a number of objections to our analysis. A basic one is that political participation has never been the only call on citizens' time, nor is it likely to assume this status in future. The technology for the realization of 'electronic democracy' has been in existence for many years, to no avail. On the other hand it would be equally futile to suggest that there have not been significant changes in ICTs which make both their inherent properties and their context of use radically different from the false dawns of the past. A further objection could be made along the lines that the consultative and participatory models we identify are not the domain of executives but of legislatures, and that citizens should look to Congress and Parliament (even the relatively weak European Parliament) to fulfil these roles. In one sense this is a valid criticism, but if the problem is defined in a different way, it seems less convincing. The power asymmetry that exists between executives

and legislatures (particularly in Britain and the level of the EU), means that the latter are not likely to significantly increase their influence through the use of ICTs. But we also need to pay attention to the ways in which ICTs may be used to reconfigure governance in representative democracies. They make it possible to deliver managerial efficiency as well as increased democratic influence. E-government makes it possible to blur the distinctions between traditional executive and legislative functions by potentially allowing citizens *as citizens* to have direct political influence upon public bureaucracies in unprecedented ways. It is this potential development that we argue could be compromised by executives which seek to protect and fortify their own position.

It is crucial to stress here that the managerialism we identify is perfectly capable of straddling different administrative cultures. The emergence of the new public management (NPM) in Britain and, to a lesser but still important extent in the United States, may be viewed as a solution to long-perceived problems with the 'efficiency' of public bureaucracies, and ICTs have been seen as an important component of those changes. Yet computers have been seen as solutions to the problems of the public sector since the emergence of the first mainframe systems of the 1960s – long before NPM. Equally, if a new 'digital state paradigm' is to replace NPM, as Patrick Dunleavy and Helen Margetts have recently suggested, then its characteristic features are still likely to be managerial and not consultative or participatory. Even if a 'digital state' emerges, there are likely to be significant problems with injecting citizen participation into policy-making. Many of these difficulties are independent of external factors like the 'digital divide', but are determined by the rather old-fashioned vagaries of competitive elitism in liberal democracies. Individuals may get better service as consumers from their governments, but as far as the possibilities of change imagined for the Internet are concerned, this should be seen as the bare minimum.

Before the arrival of the 'information age', it had already been demonstrated that the adoption of new information technology usually tends to reinforce pre-existing power inequalities, both within government, and between

government and citizens (Danziger et al, 1982). In the UK, several authors have argued that a close-knit policy community has heavily influenced decisions on the use of computers in government since the 1980s, with the result that service delivery rather than more democratic considerations has prevailed (Bellamy et al, 1995; Pratchett, 1995, 1999). Refusal to take citizen interaction seriously seemingly starts at the level of party organization. Research undertaken in 1998 discovered that British party websites 'contain only limited opportunities for interactivity' (Gibson and Ward, 1998: 31). If a significant objective of any British party is to present itself as a 'government-in-waiting', it should be no surprise that once elected, party elites are relatively uninterested in exploring the interactive potential of the web. At a time when the commercial world is realizing the possibilities of online community-building through interactivity in order to boost sales, it is significant that most parties (and ultimately governments) in the developed world have been slow to adopt this strategy (Margolis et al, 1997, 1999).

The claims made for democracy in the information age, the manner in which governments interact with the states' citizens, could go either way. Clinton called in 1999 for each federal agency to make its officials more accessible through publication of email addresses which could be used for questions and comments. At the same time, the National Science Foundation was charged with conducting a year-long feasibility study of 'on-line voting' (Office of the President, Press Secretary (US), 1999). Further experimentation with on-line participation has been suggested by the President's Information Technology Advisory Committee, though it has to be said that this is just a small part of a report which has an overwhelming focus on using IT to improve the *internal* management of government information (President's Information Technology Advisory Committee, 2000).

Whatever the claims for a participatory model, delivering it may prove more difficult. When attempts to introduce 'e-government' are examined, not only do the achievements to date fall considerably short, it would seem that this is the intention. Even on its own terms, the managerial approach has been

criticized. In Britain, there are several bizarre qualifications to the 100% target set by government, according to which 'all' government services should be accessible 'electronically' by 2005. 'Electronically' includes communication by that nineteenth-century breakthrough, the telephone (National Audit Office, 1999: 83). Similarly, in the US, the Clinton Memorandum made it quite clear that the co-ordinating power of ICTs has hitherto been under-utilized. The difficulties with implementing technologically-enhanced managerialism should not be underestimated, and often may incur significant front-loaded investment in hardware and training. The reluctance to develop participatory and consultative strategies in the face of their likely resource needs is therefore a little less surprising if profoundly disappointing for those who hoped the information age would automatically bring with it a reformed and empowered civil society.

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