

**THE INTERNET, LOCAL PARTICIPATION
AND DEMOCRACY: AN
INSTITUTIONALIST APPROACH**

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A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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September 2004

**TEXT BOUND INTO
THE SPINE**

Abstract

This thesis analyses Internet-based strategies for the enhancement of political participation in the context of British local government. In particular, the thesis explores the extent to which the Internet is used by local authorities for participation purposes and aims to reveal the limitations of such an enterprise. The research is based on a case study approach and qualitative analysis. The primary data source is a set of semi-structured interviews with elected and appointed actors in three selected local authorities. In addition, the websites of these authorities and relevant documents were analysed.

The research found that the Internet is mostly perceived as an information provision and service delivery tool, and that it is much less likely to be considered as a medium for stimulating citizen participation. The research also revealed a strong belief that electronic participation should only be an addition to, and not a replacement for, traditional methods of participation.

Drawing upon political participation and democracy literature, the thesis argues that although some practical problems of participation can be ameliorated with the use of the Internet, normative concerns are reproduced in the context of the Internet. The most important of those normative concerns is the paradox relating to participation and equality. Being aware of the issue of digital divide, policy actors are cautious about using the Internet for participation purposes. This undermines the vision for electronic participation. Drawing on social shaping of technology arguments and the literature on new institutionalism, the thesis also argues that the use of the Internet is shaped differently in different institutional settings. Without political willingness and a deliberate intention to use the Internet for participation purposes, the use of the Internet fails to introduce rapid and transformative change in either the levels or the style of political participation.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AOL	America Online
BV	Best Value
BVPI	Best Value Performance Indicator
CMC	Computer Mediated Communication
CLD	Commission for Local Democracy
CPA	Comprehensive Performance Assessment
DETR	Department of Environment, Transport and Regions
DTLR	Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions
E-Democracy	Electronic Democracy
E-Government	Electronic Government
Email	Electronic Mail
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
E-Voting	Electronic Voting
HDC	Harborough District Council
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
IDEA	Improvement and Development Agency
IEG	Implementing Electronic Government
IT	Information Technology
LGA	Local Government Association
MP	Member of Parliament
ODPM	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
OECD	Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development
OWBC	Oadby and Wigston Borough Council
SOCITM	Society of Information Technology Management
SOLACE	Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers
WBC	Wellingborough Borough Council
WEAST	Wellingborough East Project

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Lawrence Pratchett and Vivien Lowndes for their invaluable support during my research. They have been excellent supervisors, but more importantly, excellent friends. This thesis is theirs as much as it is mine.

I would like to thank the Department of Public Policy for providing me a scholarship without which the thesis could not have been written at all. I would like to thank all members of the department and particularly Valeria (for cooking sessions, departmental gossip and discussions about our professional futures) and Caroline (for our long conversations about biscuits and diets, not to mention all her administrative support).

I would like to thank Liz and Denise who gave me a home when I needed it most, although I am not sure about thanking Liz for the running mania that she dragged me into. Still, I must admit that it helped me a lot during the writing stage. I would also like to thank Hakan, for encouraging me for the final push from miles away, and Derek, for proofreading the thesis so patiently (sorry!).

Of course, I cannot escape mentioning my family; they always had faith in me for achieving whatever I wanted to achieve. Finally, I would like to thank Zafer for his immense support and sacrifice. He deserves a long holiday as soon as I find a job, but I don't want to think about this now!

CHAPTER 1

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

This research has been concerned with analysing the strategies of local authorities in terms of using the Internet for enhancing political participation. The research aimed to understand how local authorities' attitudes towards citizen participation and the Internet develop within an institutional context. It has explored the extent to which attitudes towards electronic participation are built on attitudes towards participation in general. The research has also aimed to identify the specific constraints upon the vision for using the Internet for political participation purposes at the local level.

The debate about the ways technology can aid democracy has been continuing especially in the 'advanced' parts of the world since the 1970s (Laudon, 1977; Arterton, 1987; Mclean, 1989). The debate accelerated with the proliferation of the Internet as an information and communication medium. The Internet is believed to contribute to democracy by enabling the dissemination of information, participation of citizens and increased transparency in government affairs. In parallel to these developments, there has been both academic and policy interest in subjects such as e-democracy, e-voting and e-government. At the same time, in many democracies, including the UK, which constitutes the focus of this thesis, there has been a declining interest in electoral and non-electoral participation, especially in local politics. Governments have introduced new projects and programmes to promote the use of the Internet and other ICTs as ways of informing people and facilitating participation. Elected local authorities have also begun to experiment with new technologies both to provide better local services and to further realise their democratic role.

In the academic field, specific features of the Internet that enable rapid and cheap dissemination of information and introduce new modes of communication have led to

various anticipations about the ways in which it might contribute to citizen participation and democracy. However, it would be a mistake to suppose that any technology is inherently democratic, regardless of the potentially useful features it possesses. In addition, the design and the implementation of these technologies are highly dependent on the constraints and opportunities of the organisational settings within which they are used. Many studies show that, although the new technologies are being exploited to enhance participatory politics, there are great variations between different organisational settings (Margetts and Dunleavy, 2002). The local authorities, for example, differ in their strategies for using the Internet. They have different priorities and purposes. Not only Internet use, but also the attitudes of authorities towards citizen involvement and actual participation rates (both electoral and non-electoral) vary across localities (Rallings et al, 1994; Parry et al, 1992, DETR, 1998a; ODPM, 2002). Lowndes et al (2002) explain this by reference to the 'filtering' role of local political institutions. Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) also emphasise institutional elements (rules, culture and orientation) among the factors that influence citizen participation. It is an important theoretical task to explore why such variations, in terms of both political participation and Internet use, occur.

Debates about the use of the Internet emphasise rapid and transformative change. Political science as a discipline, on the other hand, is more cautious and measured in its assessment of processes of change than technology-driven arguments. Unlike these technology-driven arguments, major political science perspectives generally suggest that inertia and stability are the norm in the public sector. Although some political science perspectives are precisely about analysing change, there is an established body of literature on political institutions that emphasises forces of stability and inertia and the significant difficulties in effecting change. Such perspectives promise to temper enthusiasm about the possible impact of the Internet, which may well be a product of the undue emphasis that is often placed upon the 'technology' dimension of the Internet. Rather than taking such a technologically deterministic approach, this thesis argues that the Internet is socially constructed (Pinch and Bijker, 1984) and shaped (Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1999). By adopting a meso-level approach, the research explored how the given properties of the Internet are shaped and

constructed within different institutional settings and how changes in the technology are converted to political behaviour in different contexts.

The originality and importance of the thesis lies in linking the recent debates on the role of the Internet for enhancing participation with established knowledge on political participation. Referring to the established knowledge on political participation helps in two respects. First, such knowledge points at the importance of top-down mobilisation for facilitating political participation (Maloney et al, 2000; Lowndes and Wilson, 2001). Accordingly, the degree that the Internet can enhance political participation depends on the availability of a political structure that is amenable to the use of the Internet for this purpose. Second, established knowledge on political participation suggests that there are certain practical and normative arguments concerning political participation. Some of these arguments, particularly the practical ones such as the problem of size and time, can be ameliorated with the use of the Internet. However, the normative arguments concerning participation, such as the autonomy of elected representatives, are likely to remain. The thesis argues that such arguments can be potential barriers to the use of the Internet for enhancing political participation. In other words, if limited political participation is advocated on normative grounds, then the policy actors would be unwilling to use the Internet for enhancing political participation anyway.

Specifically the thesis argues that:

- The use of the Internet is shaped differently in the institutional settings of different local authorities. This can be explained by reference to social shaping of technology theories as well as the role of political institutions.
- The use of the Internet introduces incremental change which is neither transformative nor revolutionary. However, there is also an ongoing deliberate attempt being made by certain actors at the central and local levels to shape the use of the Internet.
- It is important to draw from established knowledge on political participation and democracy in understanding the significance of the top-down design of participation

initiatives (especially by local government) as well as the use of the Internet for this purpose.

- It is important to draw from established knowledge on political participation in order to evaluate how the normative and practical arguments concerning participation are ameliorated or reproduced with the use of the Internet.

The research is not concerned with measuring whether the use of the Internet contributes to the enhancement of political participation or not. In other words, it is not an attempt to compare and contrast participation levels and styles before and after the use of the Internet. Rather, the purpose is to analyse how political actors and, more specifically, local authorities shape the Internet for participation purposes and how their vision for using the Internet is constrained. The focus on top-down strategies is related to three factors. First, by emphasising the significance of the top-down mobilisation of participation, the thesis highlights the fact that if there are no channels for participation or if there is a lack of willingness to use the technology for this purpose, the availability of the Internet *per se* cannot contribute to participation. Therefore, it is essential to understand the attitudes and strategies of political actors in using the Internet for political participation purposes. Second, by taking a social shaping of technology perspective, the thesis argues that, instead of focusing on the given properties of the Internet, we need to look at how the Internet is constructed and shaped by political actors operating within different institutional contexts. Third, there is a deliberate attempt in many developed countries, including the UK, to use the Internet for both democratic and managerial purposes. It is important to understand how this deliberate design attempt is constrained and enabled.

Before presenting arguments and developments in relation to these issues, it is useful to contextualise these developments by considering the significance of local participation and the developments regarding the Internet and by defining the scope of the analysis. The chapter ends with an indication of the structure of the thesis by outlining the purpose of subsequent chapters.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LOCAL PARTICIPATION

The debate about political participation has been a long-running one from classical to modern political theorists (Rousseau, 1968; J.S. Mill, 1910; Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984). Although participation has not always been welcomed (Schumpeter, 1976), it has become a popular policy and academic subject. The debate about participation and democracy affords a central place to local participation because of its educative role (J. S. Mill, 1910), its contribution to the creation and maintenance of community feeling (Rousseau, 1968; De Tocqueville, 1946), and in providing a strong sense of political efficacy (Almond and Verba, 1980). It is argued that participation is easier and more meaningful at the local government level, which is more accessible and relevant to people's lives than the national government (Phillips, 1994). Although electoral turnout at the local level is lower than at the national level, there is evidence that the public are more likely to be in contact with politicians and officials at the local level (Parry et al, 1992). Therefore, local participation is relevant and important for many people and deserves to be studied closely.

The significance of studying political participation stems both from normative debates within democratic theory and from the dilemmas regarding the practice of participation. The normative theories about the value of participation (J. S. Mill, 1910; Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984) regard it as a necessary condition and principle of democracy. Accordingly, democracy is only possible if opportunities for participation exist. However, disagreements start when it comes to the question of how much participation is required. The amount and modes of participation form a significant part of the debate about different models of democracy. The tension between different models of democracy - especially the representative and participatory models - is also reflected in the practice of participation. Research shows that local representatives believe that their role is diminished to that of representation without power, partly because of increasing participation initiatives (Leach and Wingfield, 1999). In this context, the use of the Internet for political participation purposes brings the potential of enhancing one model (participatory) *vis-à-vis* the other (representative). In this sense, the use of the Internet for participation purposes is at the heart of a normative debate on the value of different models of democracy. The thesis

explores how this tension plays a role in shaping strategies concerning Internet use. It argues that the use of the Internet is shaped within the parameters of representative democracy and that there is no tendency toward more radical models based on increased political participation. However, the research aims to identify developments towards different models of democracy (if they exist) as a result of the use of the Internet.

The normative debates also centre on the dilemma between participation and equality. Any increase in participation beyond the ballot box is likely to create inequalities between those who participate and those who do not (Philips, 1994). Considering that equality is also a condition and principle of democracy, it is possible to suggest that there is a paradoxical situation surrounding the relation between participation and democracy. These normative issues are reflected in the practice of participation as well. Research shows that most of existing participation comes from a small but active segment of the society (Parry et al, 1992). The paradox of participation and equality is exacerbated when the Internet is used for political participation purposes. The Internet is more likely to advantage those who are already advantaged in terms of income, skills and access to political links, all of which are important predictors of participation. There is a growing debate on the issue of 'digital divide' (Bonfadelli, 2002; Dijk, 2000b; OECD, 2001), which refers to inequalities in accessing the Internet and the social and political implications of this divide. Concerning the use of the Internet for political participation purposes, political actors may be even more reluctant, especially in places where there are considerable issues of Internet access.

An additional factor that makes participation an important subject of study is related to the decline (or otherwise) in participation rates. On one side, there is the suggestion that many important aspects of political participation, such as electoral turnout and party membership, have declined over the last decades. On the other side, there is the counter argument suggesting it is not so much that participation has declined, but rather that it has evolved over time and taken on new forms (Pattie et al, 2003). Participation in online political activities can be seen as an example of such new forms. In response to the decline in participation, there have been suggestions about the possibilities for top-down facilitation

of participation by providing necessary channels and opportunities (Lowndes and Wilson, 2001; Maloney et al, 2000). The policy context also reflects such a belief in the top-down facilitation of participation, which is emphasised in several policy documents (DETR, 1998b; DTLR, 2001). This research is not concerned with measuring the decline (or otherwise) in political participation levels or with assessing how the use of the Internet assists in enhancing participation. Rather, it is concerned with understanding whether there is belief within local authorities that there is scope for enhancing participation from the top. In the absence of such a belief, the use of the Internet for participation purposes would not even be considered. The research is also aimed at finding out whether political actors consider the Internet to be the right medium for enhancing political participation.

In short, studying participation is significant for many reasons. Although the relationship between participation and democracy is not straightforward, participation has been an important theme within democratic theory. It also lies at the heart of the tension between representative and participatory models of democracy. The significance of political participation will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. The thesis contributes to the debate by analysing how these issues surrounding political participation affect the strategies of local authorities concerning the use of the Internet. For example, the paradox of participation and equality may become a barrier to the use of the Internet for participation purposes if political actors believe that certain segments of society would be systematically excluded. Alternatively, political actors may simply ignore the implications of the digital divide, which in turn would lead to further inequalities. The thesis also contributes to the debate by exploring whether the issues surrounding political participation are *rectified* or *reproduced* with the use of the Internet.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INTERNET

The growing number of Internet users coupled with the medium's exploitation for commercial purposes has caused the Internet to become an important phenomenon in people's lives. The International Telecommunication Union estimated that, by 2002, there

were 665 million Internet users around the world. Of these, roughly 30 per cent can be found in North America and 31 per cent in Europe¹. In the UK, which constitutes the focus of this research, by the second quarter of 2003, 48 per cent of households can access the Internet from home and 61 per cent of adults had used the Internet at some time in their lives². The use of the Internet has brought about significant changes in commerce, shopping, entertainment and communication habits.

Regarding the significance of the Internet for political processes in general and democratic governance in particular, the existing debate on the ways the technology can aid democracy (Laudon, 1977; Arterton, 1987; Mclean, 1989) has become even more relevant and important (among many see, Hague and Loader, 1999; Hoff et al, 2000). As access to the Internet and its use in various aspects of social life has diffused, the idea of using the technology to enhance democratic governance has also been widely debated. This is related to both the specific features of the Internet that are believed to contribute to democracy and the increasing problems of democracy, especially declining interest and participation in politics. There have been various speculations about the possible contribution of the Internet to democracy. Suggestions range from the creation of a virtual public sphere (Schalken, 2000) and the expansion of opportunities to enhance civil liberties (Percy Smith, 1995), to increased accountability (Hague and Loader, 1999) and participation (White, 1997; Lenk, 1999).

Among these potential ways of contributing to democracy, this research is interested in the ways in which the Internet can be used to enhance political participation. Many studies examine the extent to which the Internet can be used to modernise the voting process and boost electoral turnout (Norris, 2001a and 2003). There are also studies exploring the extent to which the use of the Internet may boost *non-electoral* participation not only by making

¹ How Much Information 2003? School of Information and Management Systems, University of California Berkeley, available at http://www.sims.berkeley.edu/research/projects/how-much-info-2003/printable_report.pdf, accessed on 02 July 2004

² National Statistics Omnibus Survey, Access to Internet from Home – Source - Family Expenditure Survey (April 1998 to March 2001); Expenditure and Food Survey (April 2001 onwards), available at www.statistics.gov.uk

such processes more convenient and accessible, but also by introducing new modes of participation (White, 1997; Lenk, 1999). There is scope for attracting people who have not participated before, especially the young (Norris, 2003; Coleman and Hall, 2001) and for providing existing participants with more convenient methods of participation.

The significance of the Internet does not consist solely in its ability to provide *practical* solutions to the problems of representative democracy, for instance by enabling electronic voting. There has also been a *normative* debate about the potential of the Internet for enhancing different models of democracy. By enabling more frequent and convenient participation, the use of the Internet may enhance a participatory model of democracy, for instance through the use of online referendums, discussion groups and forums.

Policy makers, especially those in the 'advanced' parts of the world including the UK, have already started to consider the significance of the Internet. As part of a desire for modernisation and for greater citizen involvement, an important role has been attributed to the Internet both as a means of increasing efficiency in public services and as a way of enhancing political participation. In addition, many experiments on electronic voting, online consultation and deliberation have been initiated. The significance of the Internet does not stem merely from its technical features, but also from these policy developments.

The use of the Internet is not significant only because of expected positive outcomes. Its significance also arises from its negative impacts such as the 'digital divide' issue. Even if the use of the Internet brings about higher levels of participation, there remains the question of equality. The Internet is more likely to advantage those who are already advantaged in terms of income, skills and access to political links. Despite various government initiatives aimed at ameliorating this problem, the use of the Internet in the public sector is likely to enhance existing inequalities in the society and has profound implications for the practice of democracy.

The Internet is not only a medium; it is also a resource. However, it is a resource only for those who are able to exploit it. Therefore, it is possible that its use could lead to changing power relations not only between citizens, but also between elected representatives and civil servants. This has significant implications for the practice of representative democracy, both because it could change the nature of the relationship between citizens and their representatives and because it could introduce inequalities between different locations.

The use of the Internet (or not) creates inequalities between organisations as well as individual actors. Some public organisations, including local authorities, may exploit the Internet in much better ways than others. This may create inequalities in terms of their relations with central government, other public agencies and citizens. While some organisations are rewarded for their progress, others may be punished for lagging behind. Those that are left behind are likely to face a legitimacy problem, especially when the use of the Internet becomes a dominant norm.

In short, the use of the Internet introduces opportunities for enhancing participation and a potential for the exclusion of certain groups. Its significance stems from the implications of its use not only for participation and democracy, but also for changing power relations in the polity, especially through its unequal distribution. The significance of the Internet and the ways in which its use can potentially enhance political participation will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. The purpose of the research is not to assess whether the specific technical features of the Internet contribute to the enhancement of political participation or not. Rather, the purpose is to explore how the issues surrounding the use of the Internet such as digital divide or the prospect for participatory models of democracy affect the Internet strategies of political actors. The research argues that although political actors are encouraged by the positive anticipation concerning the potential of the Internet, they are also constrained by the negative issues associated with the use of the Internet. The strategies of local authorities, therefore, develop within an institutional context in which actors try to make sense of all these developments, issues and anticipations. In addition to analysing the development of those strategies, the thesis contributes to the debate by

identifying emerging issues, patterns and trends associated with the use of the Internet for political participation purposes.

SCOPE OF THE ANALYSIS

So far, the discussion has provided a general overview of the significance of local participation for democratic governance and has indicated the relevance of the Internet to the enterprise of enhancing participation and democracy. Before proceeding to conduct the empirical and theoretical analysis, it is necessary to identify the boundaries and scope of the research. This will help in drawing conclusions from the empirical and theoretical evidence. The scope of the research is considered in terms of the definition of participation that is used, the aspects of the Internet that the research concentrates upon, organisations that are of interest, and the time period to which the research applies.

The research is concerned with participation directed towards and engendered by elected local government. Therefore, it has a top-down focus, which concentrates on participation initiated by the local government, rather than participation that originates from the bottom-up by citizens. The research focuses on vertical communication between the council and the citizens rather than horizontal relations among citizens, which may or may not have an impact on council decision-making. This is partly because the research looks at participation within the parameters of representative democracy without proposing a radical model of participatory democracy. This is not to suggest that the research ignores developments towards alternative models of democracy. On the contrary, identifying such developments is one of the purposes of the study. However, while doing this, the research does not engage in a normative debate about the value of such models.

The research is primarily interested in non-electoral participation both because electoral participation has already been studied extensively (Rallings et al, 1994; Diplock, 2002; Segell, 1997) and because it is regulated by legal arrangements leaving local authorities with very limited discretion. However, since electronic voting constitutes an important

element of discussions about the use of the Internet for democratic purposes (Norris 2001a; 2003), developments regarding electronic voting are inevitably considered.

This is not a piece of research on electronic democracy; it is a piece of research on electronic participation. This is not to ignore the relation between participation and democracy, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3. However, political participation is only one condition/principle of democracy. Enhanced political participation through the use of the Internet does not necessarily lead to the enhancement of democracy, especially due to the unequal distribution of electronic participation.

The scope of the research should also be explained in terms of the study of the Internet. The research is not concerned with the technical dimension of the Internet; it is the social and political aspects that are of interest. In addition, the empirical part of the research does not focus on the general impact of the proliferation of the Internet, such as increased sources of information or the emergence of new patterns of communication, although this is discussed at a theoretical level in Chapter 3. The primary focus of the research is to analyse the strategies of local authorities in using the Internet for participation purposes.

The thesis is focused on elected local government within the wider local governance system. It is acknowledged that drawing such a clear line is problematic considering that some elected authorities have links with many other agencies. In the UK, there has been a transformation of the structure of local government into a system of local *governance* involving complex sets of organisations coming from the public, private and voluntary sectors. There is a lot of research looking into the implications of this process for citizen participation (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002). However, this research is focused on elected local government for two reasons. First, it is the only elected body among these newly emerging structures and has a unique position in this respect. It still has a central role as the primary focus for political debate and co-ordination between a range of other active organisations. Second, too great a focus on the processes of local governance runs the risk of distracting attention from the values of an elected local government. As Stoker (1996)

notes “there is a need in the light of this transformation for renewed normative debate about the proper role of local government and the value of local democracy” (p. 1). Although this research does not intend to engage in such a normative debate, its focus on elected local government shares a similar concern. Within elected local government, the third-tier local authorities are excluded for three reasons. First, they have very limited responsibility for public services. Second, being very small geographically makes using the Internet for participation purposes less meaningful than it is in larger areas. Third, these authorities have limited resources to devote to the development of participation initiatives using the Internet.

In terms of the time period to which the research applies, the empirical research was undertaken during 2002-2003 and the findings in relation to the specific local authorities relate to the political and organisational context of that period. In May 2003, the political make up of the case study authorities changed. This may or may not have affected the empirical findings of the research. However, the general political climate in terms of the importance of participation and the use of the Internet stayed the same. Besides, there has been no radical change in the development of the Internet. Therefore, the theoretical and analytical findings of the research have wider relevance despite the changes in the political make up of the case study local authorities.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

Having established in this chapter, the significance of the research and its specific questions, the following ten chapters further investigate the research questions outlined above. Chapters 2 and 3 develop the two objects of the thesis: local participation and the Internet. Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the relation between participation and democracy. First, it provides a definition of participation that is adapted in this research and discusses the limitations of this definition. Second, the chapter considers the arguments for and against participation. The chapter highlights the paradox of participation and equality and argues that the relation between participation and democracy is non-linear because of

this paradox. The chapter also discusses the role of participation within different models of democracy and explores whether there is any scope for the top-down facilitation of participation, especially by local authorities. Finally, the chapter reviews the trend for local political participation in the UK through exploring the developments regarding political participation within the policy context since the 1960s.

Chapter 3 establishes the relation between participation, the Internet and democracy. First, it examines the role of the Internet as an information source and as a communication medium in order to identify how these two aspects can potentially contribute to the enhancement of participation. The chapter acknowledges the properties of the Internet that could be used to facilitate participation without subscribing to the view that the mere existence of the Internet leads to more participation. The chapter highlights the need to draw from established theories of participation, which emphasise the role of top-down mobilisation for participation. It also considers the digital divide issues and argues that even if the use of the Internet leads to more participation, this does not necessarily mean more democracy because of various inequalities in the distribution of access, skills and orientations. The chapter also considers the potential ways in which the Internet can be used to support different models of democracy. Finally, the chapter provides information about the trend for using the Internet for participation and electronic service delivery purposes.

Chapter 4 starts to develop a research agenda and framework by synthesising the previous two chapters and bringing together the dilemmas and limitations identified before. It provides a critique of the existing literature on electronic democracy and identifies its main limitations. In order to address these limitations, the chapter first reviews the processes of technological development from different perspectives and suggests a middle way approach, which emphasises the significance of the social shaping and construction of the Internet without ignoring its given properties. Second, the chapter develops an operationalisation of e-government and e-democracy both to clarify the use of these two concepts throughout the thesis and more importantly to distinguish developments towards

e-government and e-democracy. Third, the chapter explains why a meso-level study is necessary.

Pursuing the point developed in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 explores the potential contribution of new institutional theory as a meso-level approach. The chapter starts to develop an institutional approach, which at the same time provides the tools for explaining the processes of change and stability. The chapter conceptualises the ideas of institutional context, institutional design and processes of institutionalisation. In this way, the chapter prepares the tools to explain how the properties of the Internet can be understood and implemented differently in different organisational and institutional settings. By applying these tools to the object of analysis, the chapter ends with three propositions intended to guide the analysis.

Having introduced the object of analysis, identified the major dilemmas and developed an analytical framework, Chapter 6 develops a methodological framework in order to operationalise the research propositions. This involved a case study of three elected local authorities in the East Midlands. Chapter 6 provides background information about the case study authorities and the details of applied methods. The chapter also discusses the epistemological underpinnings and boundaries of the framework in relation to the issues of validity, reliability and generalisability of the research. By addressing the generalisability of the three cases, the chapter provides an opportunity to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions of the research can be applied to other local authorities and the public sector in general.

Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 provide an analysis of the empirical findings. Chapter 7 develops from the literature review while the subsequent analysis chapters develop from the theoretical framework that was constructed in Chapter 5. Chapter 7 summarises the findings of the case study research and analyses the ways in which participation is defined, perceived and actually implemented by policy actors in local government. The overall purpose of the chapter is to provide an understanding of the strategies in relation to

participation and the use of the Internet for participation purposes. By analysing the attitudes towards participation *per se* before analysing attitudes towards *electronic* participation, the chapter aims to demonstrate the extent to which attitudes towards electronic participation are built on attitudes towards participation in general.

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 apply the three research propositions to the three case studies by using the analytical and methodological frameworks that have been developed. Chapter 8 investigates the role of the internal and the wider institutional environment in shaping strategies for using the Internet for participation purposes. It provides an explanation for processes of homogenisation and variation between local authorities in terms of their strategies for enhancing electronic participation. Chapter 9 analyses the process of design of new institutions associated with electronic participation. It aims to reveal the constraints upon institutional design and to reach conclusions on how design of new institutions associated with electronic participation can be achieved. Chapter 10 argues that institutions are not once-and-for-all creations and that institutionalisation is a dynamic process. For this reason, the chapter analyses the degree to which the new institutions associated with electronic participation lead to changes in attitudes and behaviour. The chapter concludes with a set of suggestions that would enhance the institutionalisation process.

Finally, chapter 11 brings together the empirical analysis and the theoretical framework developed before in order to reach conclusions on the relationship between the Internet, local participation and democracy. The chapter articulates the contribution of the thesis, reviews the policy implications of the research and finally considers the limitations of the research along with some reflections on topics and methods for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LOCAL PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRACY: THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is divided into four parts, each with a different purpose. The first part is concerned with conceptualising local political participation. Instead of proposing a single universal definition, participation is conceptualised for the purposes of *this* study. The second part explores the relationship between participation and democracy. This is achieved by reviewing the arguments for and against participation and analysing the role of participation within different models of democracy. The third part is concerned with explaining participation and non-participation. It reviews some of the explanatory theories and suggests that the top-down supply of participation channels is important in facilitating (or not) participation and argues that there is both a role and scope for local government to enhance participation. The final part reviews the trend toward local political participation in the UK by exploring the developments relating to political participation within the policy context since the 1960s. The chapter as a whole provides a basis for the empirical research by clarifying what kind of participation is of interest, at what level, and under what kind of democracy.

CONCEPTUALISING LOCAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation is not perceived merely as voting in elections. Participation also takes place between elections in various individual and collective forms (Parry et al, 1992). In fact, Deth (2001) argues that the repertoire and domain of political participation has grown so considerably that the study of participation has become the study of everything. The content of recent participation studies range from organised petitions and protest meetings (Parry et al, 1992) to working in elections and donating money (Verba et al, 1995). There is a debate on the extent to which these activities are 'political' and the extent to which they are 'participation'.

As Pateman (1970) notes, the term 'participation' has become part of the popular political vocabulary; its use is so widespread now that it has lost nearly all of its substantive, meaningful content (p. 1). And this problem has become even more pronounced since the time of her writings. Therefore, it is important to unpack the content of this term. Defining political participation is also important because there is disagreement on whether there is a decline in participation levels or not. On one side, it is claimed that people have become disenchanted from politics, as can be seen from declining electoral turnouts (Diplock, 2002; Rallings et al, 1994). On the other side, however, it is argued that participation has taken new forms (Pattie et al, 2003). Empirical studies that adopt different definitions of participation produce different, even contradictory, results.

In a sense, the research is an attempt to understand how participation is perceived and defined by local policy makers. Therefore, this section is concerned merely to develop a working definition of participation, which may serve as a guideline for the research; it is not concerned to offer the last word on the nature of the phenomenon. A classic definition of participation is provided by Parry et al (1992) who suggest that participation is "taking part in the processes of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies" (p. 16). Participation is also defined as the voluntary actions of private citizens to influence political choices (Kaase and Marsh, 1979, p. 42) or the selection of governmental personnel (Verba and Nie, 1972, p. 2) and to communicate information to government officials (Verba et al, 1995, p. 37).

However, even these somewhat loose definitions are problematic for theorists who emphasise the potential of participation to contribute to self-fulfilment and political education. Similarly, participation can take place as a form of expressing one's self in the shape of protest (expressive). In this sense, participation is not seen solely as a means to an end; it is also regarded as a setting within which the values and identities of participants can be expressed and as a medium through which alternative cultures and institutions can be developed. Participation may reflect what Hardin calls 'the desire to be there' (cited in Parry et al, 1992, p. 15).

Another issue is related to unpacking the term 'political'. The Oxford dictionary defines political as "of or relating to the government or public affairs of a country" (1999). However, "a demarcation of the concept of political participation on the basis of the domain of government activities is not very promising since the scope of government activities is very difficult to define" (Deth, 2001, p. 10). The distinction between political and non-political is blurred in discussions about the domain and scope of politics too. Pateman (1970), for example, suggests that industry should be seen as a political system in its own right, offering areas of participation. Empirical studies also increasingly include extra-political participation activities in their research. Verba et al (1995) explain that it is important to do so because non-political activity may also be a politicising experience providing participants with civic and political skills, and even functioning as a centre for political recruitment. Since this research is concerned with participation in elected local government, it could automatically be suggested that it is about *political* participation. Although this is true to a great extent, it is also important to acknowledge that local authorities may choose to limit their participation initiatives to less political and more managerial issues.

Political participation can take place in a variety of ways. Verba and Nie (1972) distinguished for the first time several 'modes' of participation: voting, campaigning, communal activity, and contacting the officials or representatives. To this list, Parry et al (1992, Ch. 2) added protest activities including direct action and political violence. The variety of modes of political participation suggests that different people may choose to participate through different modes. Moreover, different modes vary in the type of engagement expected from the participant. For example, while contacting an officer may require only a short time commitment, party campaigning is likely to be rather more demanding. From the officials' perspective, some modes may be more legitimate than the others (i.e. voting versus protesting). Modes may also vary in their level of effectiveness; some modes may be more likely to result in desired outcomes than others. Acknowledging the existence of different modes is important if the different patterns of participation are to be explained.

Exploring local government initiatives reveals a multiplicity of participation methods that differ along certain important dimensions such as the level of political knowledge required from the participant, individualistic or collective methods, ongoing or one off relations with the participants and so on. While some activities involve a great deal of deliberation, others may require minimal thought and time. The following categories are largely adapted from Lowndes et al's (2001a) census of participation initiatives in local government.

- **Traditional methods**: Methods which have a long history of use in local government and which are traditionally associated with public participation e.g. questions at council meetings, consultation documents.
- **Consumerist methods**: Forms of participation, which are primarily customer-oriented in their purpose and are mainly concerned with aspects of service delivery e.g. satisfaction surveys, complaint schemes, opinion polls on services, forums on specific services, user groups.
- **Deliberative methods**: New methods, which encourage citizens to reflect upon issues affecting them and their communities through some form of deliberative process e.g. focus groups, citizen juries, visioning exercises.
- **Forums and panels**: Activities that bring people together under some common features such as individuals concerned with a specific issue or individuals with shared demographic features and identities. Examples could be health forums, rural forums, and ethnic minority forums. Panels, on the other hand, are statistically representative samples of citizens who are periodically consulted on a range of issues.
- **Online methods**: This includes any of the above methods carried electronically on the Internet e.g. consultation through the website, online discussion groups, online polls.

These methods attract people with different resources and political orientations. Different approaches are appropriate at different times and for different purposes. The selection of these methods also reflects different perceptions of the role of local

authorities. For example, the service delivery role of the local government is likely to push the local authorities towards service satisfaction surveys and complaint schemes. On the other hand, local authorities have a democratic role for collective decision-making and facilitating community debate. This role is likely to push them towards more deliberative methods such as forums, juries and visioning exercises.

It is also argued that there is a hierarchy of different participation initiatives determined by the degree to which they distribute power to citizens (Arnstein, 1971). There is a general tendency in the literature sharply to distinguish 'consultation' and 'participation'. Needham (2002), for example, notes that "participation is usually taken to involve a *higher degree of engagement and control* than consultation which is more likely to be government controlled and advisory" (emphasis added, p. 704).

Accordingly, consultation is developed top-down by local authorities and organised depending on their needs. Participation, on the other hand, is believed to be developed bottom-up and to have a greater potential for shifting power to citizens. However, this distinction between consultation and participation overestimates the degree of hierarchy between different methods. Local authorities may choose to employ different methods depending on the circumstances. The fact that the local authorities initiate these methods does not necessarily mean that citizens do not exercise any influence on decisions. The confusion between consultation and participation is accentuated because of linguistics too. While consultation is something that is done by local authorities, participation is done by the people. In other words, local authorities consult; people participate. Therefore, it is expected that interviews with actors within local authorities, as well as the documents that the local authorities produce, would have more references to consultation than participation. It is important to look at the substance of the consultation activities to understand the mode and extent of citizen involvement. The empirical research aims to reveal how the concepts of consultation and participation are *defined and perceived* by the actors within the local authorities. In other words, the research explores whether the use of these concepts within local authorities depart from their use in the academic context.

Empirical evidence also shows that the conceptual distinction between consultation and participation is not always sufficient to describe the reality. Research demonstrates that many authorities have developed bottom-up strategies, which allow for more extensive public involvement (DETR, 1998a; ODPM, 2002). Yet, there are suspicions about the motives of local authorities in promoting such involvement. Boaden et al (1982) argue that elites may favour participation as a legitimating device or as a way of gaining information to improve policies or services, but do not favour participation that involves a shift of power. One might wonder what is wrong with gaining information to improve policies and services. Radical advocates of participatory democracy may perceive local authority sponsored participation as inadequate. However, this research evaluates participation within the boundaries of representative democracy as an additional mechanism to its traditional institutions such as elections. It does not have a normative concern with measuring the degree of power shift from local authorities to citizens. Rather, it is concerned with investigating various ways in which the public could make an input to local authority policymaking and service delivery.

So, what kind of participation constitutes the subject matter of this research?

Acknowledging that any definition will have limitations, this research is based on a definition of participation as “activities directed towards elected local government to influence the formulation and implementation of policy decisions”. Although it appears to be a broad definition, it actually excludes many activities. The following points are helpful in further clarifying the limitations of this definition.

Top-down initiated participation

Most importantly, the research is concerned with participation engendered by elected local government rather than the bottom up development of participation initiatives from the citizen side such as petitions or self-help groups. The research takes a ‘top-down’ approach that aims to analyse the development of participation strategies within elected local authorities. The research is not concerned with measuring the actual impact of these initiatives on increasing (or otherwise) citizen participation. The adoption of a top-down focus is related to three reasons. First, as will be discussed in the third part of this chapter (pp. 43-44), there is scope for local authorities to enhance

political participation by designing appropriate structures. Although many studies focus on the role of micro and macro variables in explaining participation and non-participation, this research follows another strand that focus on the role of political institutions and meso-level variables in explaining participation. The research argues that local government has an important role in enhancing participation because, in theory at least, it is an institution that is easily accessible to citizens, providing many relevant responsibilities for them. Second, there is a deliberate attempt in many developed countries, including the UK, to encourage political participation by developing arrangements for innovative methods of participation¹. Hence, it is important to analyse how this government policy is converted into behaviour at the local government level. Third, because the research takes a social shaping of technology perspective, it is important to focus on top-down strategies in order to understand how policy actors within local authorities shape the use of the Internet for participation purposes. Although it would be interesting to explore how *citizens* use the Internet for participation purposes, this is a different research question beyond the limits of this study.

Participation beyond elections

The research is primarily interested in non-electoral participation both because electoral participation has already been studied extensively (Rallings et al, 1994; Segell, 1997; Diplock, 2002) and because it is regulated by legal arrangements leaving local authorities with very limited discretion. However, since electronic voting constitutes an important element of discussions about the use of the Internet for democratic purposes (see next chapter), developments regarding electronic voting are inevitably considered.

Vertical rather than horizontal communication

The research focuses on activities directed towards local authorities. Therefore, it excludes citizen-to-citizen activities that are not directed towards local government. In other words, it is interested in vertical communication between local government and citizens. Horizontal communication among citizens is an essential requirement for a

¹ See among others, Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (1998) *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People*, London: DETR, Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (2001) *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services*, London: DTLR

healthy civil society. It helps in maintaining a public sphere in which rational critical debate can take place. However, this aspect of participation is beyond the limits of this research. Nevertheless, there are developments towards facilitating citizen-to-citizen discussion on local authority websites. These discussion forums are initiated by local authorities and the discussion that takes place in the forums is directed towards the local authority as well as being a form of horizontal communication among citizens. Therefore, they too fall within the remit of the research.

Contacting as individuals

The research is mainly concerned with individual contacting of the local government, through either representatives or officials. Therefore, it excludes other modes such as party campaigning or protesting. Since the research is focusing on *local government initiated* participation, this makes sense. It is less likely that local authorities would encourage protests or party campaigning. Focusing on individual contacting does not mean that the research is based on a liberal conceptualisation of democracy or that participation through voluntary organisations is perceived as less important. Again, this choice is related to the research question.

Not just online participation

The research aims to investigate both traditional and new methods of participation, although the main emphasis is on innovative modes of participation using the Internet. In this way, it is possible to put the study into a broader context rather than isolating the technology aspect of participation. Besides, merely to focus upon electronic participation would be to ignore the fact that the majority of people still do not have access to such facilities. Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that even the most innovative methods of participation build on old methods.

After defining local political participation and acknowledging the limitations of this definition, it is important to discuss why participation is desirable, if it is at all. Is there an intrinsic link between participation and democracy? Is it possible to suggest that increased participation can be a threat to democracy? The next section considers the relation between participation and democracy.

PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRACY

Participation is not the same as democracy. Although many studies start with the claim that participation is at the heart of democracy (Parry et al, 1992; Verba et al, 1995), this assumption is not self-evident. Nevertheless, there has always been a powerful tradition in democratic theory advocating more extensive and active participation. Participation is said to work against the concentration of power, enhance feelings of competence and provide a better understanding of collective problems. Different models of democracy attribute a different role and degree of importance to participation. Although participation is at the heart of theories of democracy, there are arguments against participation for normative or practical reasons. This part first discusses arguments for and against participation and then analyses the role of participation within different models of democracy.

Arguments for participation

Participation has been valued on various grounds. These justifications for participation are analysed from four perspectives: instrumentalist, liberal, developmental and communitarian. The categories are not exhaustive (others can be added) or exclusive (they may be related). Since the research is concerned with local authorities' attitudes and perceptions of participation, the following discussion analyses the case for participation from the perspective of local government. Understanding how local authorities perceive participation is important because the participation strategy of local authorities is likely to be affected by these perceptions. For example, if they perceive participation merely as a way to increase the legitimacy of their decisions, then their participation initiatives are likely to reflect this. Likewise, if they believe that people participate to maximise personal benefits, they may have sceptical views against participation.

Instrumentalist

According to this view, participation is seen as a way to increase the efficiency of the decision making process. Accordingly, decision-makers can have better knowledge about the priorities of the people and they can incorporate citizen needs into decisions. Participation also ensures that the process of implementing a policy or a decision is

easier because people understand what is being done and why (DETR, 1998a).

Therefore, decisions are less likely to face opposition and more likely to be regarded as legitimate. This may also lead to a reduction in service costs. The major studies of political participation in liberal democracies have all assumed an instrumentalist position (Verba and Nie, 1972).

The instrumental view is criticised for being too focused on individual self-interest (De-Shalit, 1997). Critics focus on the issue that the citizens need to be related to each other as deliberators and not simply as interest seeking individuals. Participation should involve debate, reasoning and reflection on the opinions of others. This line of argument is advocated under various names albeit with some differences (discursive democracy by Dryzek, 2000; strong democracy by Barber, 1984; deliberative democracy by Fishkin, 2001; dialogic democracy by Giddens, 1994). However, it is not possible to ignore the instrumental value of participation. Empirical evidence shows that people participate most when there is something at stake for them (DETR, 1998a; Lowndes et al, 2001b).

Developmental

On this view, participation is seen as a process that contributes to a good society by providing political education and enhancing feelings of power and efficacy (Mill, 1910; Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984). This view is mostly associated with proponents of radical forms of participatory democracy such as Pateman (1970) and Barber (1984) and it dates back to earlier proponents such as J. S. Mill (1910) and De Tocqueville (1946). Taking part in the processes of public decision-making is said to be an education in political life, which will develop citizen's sense of competence and responsibility. An advocate of a strong participatory democracy, Benjamin Barber (1984) believes that "civic activity educates individuals how to think publicly as citizens...as people participate, politics become universities, citizenship becomes training and participation becomes tutor" (p. 152). In an attempt to gather empirical evidence regarding the educative role of participation, Parry et al (1992) concluded, "there is an accumulative interaction between political participation, political interest and political education...those who are locked out, or locked themselves out, of participation have

fewer opportunities to learn” (p. 294). From this perspective, local participation is particularly important as a training ground for gaining political competence.

Liberal

This view follows the utilitarian approach of Bentham (1843) and James Mill (1937). According to these scholars, participation has a very narrow and protective function; it ensures that the private interests of each citizen are protected. Within the liberal view, participation is closely related to a rational conceptualisation of politics. Participation is about the promotion of interests and goals with minimum costs. Individuals can guarantee their freedoms and rights by participating in decision-making processes. Participation at the local level is important because it allows a more equal distribution of political influence (Phillips, 1994; Geddes, 1995). From the local government perspective, authorities consult individuals as consumers of the council services and collect information about their preferences and choices.

Communitarian

On this view, participation is seen as a process that contributes to the creation and maintenance of a sense of community. As people participate, they see the other people's views. They develop a feeling of attachment to the community and the place they live in. According to J. S Mill (1910), participation will have a moral influence as people come to appreciate the interests and ideas of their fellows. By participating in one's local and national affairs, one becomes more aware not only of one's own interests, but of the aspirations and interests of others to the benefit of society at large (Parry et al, 1992, p. 286). Local participation in particular increases the feeling among individual citizens that they 'belong' in their community (Rousseau cited in Pateman, 1970, p. 27).

All of these perspectives are likely to see a special virtue in local government. For those that emphasise the developmental and communitarian aspects of participation, the very 'localness' and accessibility of local government make it an ideal base for citizen participation and deliberation. For those who emphasise instrumental and liberal aspects of participation, local government has a practical value because it is the level at which many services are provided and important decisions for people's lives are taken.

Nevertheless, the participatory ideal is a contested one. There are a number of arguments against participation. They deserve close examination both to understand if there is a theoretical case against participation and to evaluate the concerns of elected and appointed elites regarding increased participation.

Arguments against participation

Arguments against participation derive from normative or practical concerns. Normative arguments are against the idea of participation *per se*. Practical concerns, on the other hand, hold that although participation is desirable it is not practical to implement in contemporary societies for several reasons, such as arithmetic impossibility and embedded inequalities.

Table 2.1: The case against participation

<i>Normative: Participation is not desirable</i>	<i>Practical: Participation is not possible</i>
Threat to stability	Arithmetically impossible
Populism and tyranny of the majority	Deadlock/impossible to reach consensus
Inefficiency in decision-making	Complicated/technical issues
People are not interested	Raising costs
Raising expectations	
Parochialism	
Undermining elected representatives	
Bureaucratic tyranny	
Encourages disharmony	
Social and political inequalities	

Participation is not desirable

Most of the opposition to participation comes from ‘democratic elitists’ such as Schumpeter (1976). This perspective places great value on the autonomy of elites to fulfil their decision-making role. There is also a concern that the stability of the system

could be upset by high mass involvement in politics. It is argued that limited participation has a positive function of maintaining stability and preventing sudden changes (e.g. Sartori, 1987). This was especially fuelled following the emergence of totalitarian regimes that promoted high levels of participation in the first half of the 20th century in Europe.

A related argument against participation is that it encourages populism and strengthens the 'tyranny of the majority'. This argument is linked to Schumpeter's (1976) mistrust of citizens. According to this view, politicians are likely to think of the general well-being of the community whereas citizens are more likely to be self-interested, reactionary and biased. Examples of some referendums (for example in Switzerland), which have produced racist and discriminatory policies, are trotted out to support this point. This concern begs the question of whether there are certain policy areas that should not be open to participation.

Empirical evidence also reveals some concerns about participation. It is argued that the participation process can have a negative impact on the decision-making process. Lowndes et al (2001a) show that more participation may slow down the decision making process by introducing additional stages into an already bureaucratic process and potentially leading to greater conflict and acrimony among different sections of the community. The DETR (1998a) report on local authorities' perceptions about participation reveals that they are worried about raising public expectations and creating unrealistic demands. Elected representatives have some reservations about participation too. They are concerned that their role as the representatives of the people may be undermined if people participate directly on policy. They are also concerned that participatory projects can strengthen the bureaucrats who may claim to have their own channel of communication with people (Needham, 2002). This argument is in fact at the heart of the tension between representative and participatory models of democracy and will be discussed later. Because this research is concerned with the strategies of local authorities in terms of participation, it is important to understand their concerns about participation.

Finally, some scholars are against citizen involvement because they have a low estimation of the capacities of the average citizen. This view originates from some classical critics of democracy. In using the metaphor of a ship captain, Plato (1974), claims that the 'true navigator' is equipped with the necessary skills and experience to rule while the people (crew) conduct their affairs on impulse, sentiment and prejudice. Likewise, Schumpeter (1976) claims that people are uninvolved, uninterested and unable to think about politics. This line of argument ignores the differences between participants and the non-participants. Empirical evidence shows that there are remarkable variations among people in their attitudes towards politics (Parry et al, 1992). Therefore, apathy and lack of interest is not an inevitable feature of human nature. The argument also fails to explain why some people participate and others do not. Some recent research also suggests that 'apathy' is too general a term to describe what are often in fact very complicated situations. For example, Warren (2002) notes that people in the developed democracies have become *disaffected* from their political institutions (emphasis original, p. 682). He suggests that disaffection may be a reflection not of apathy, but of increasingly critical evaluations of government. Similarly, research by Diplock (2002) suggests that non-voting seems to be less about 'apathy' and more about a positive abstention.

Participation is not possible

Others are not against participation in principle, but point to practical concerns, emphasising the arithmetic of participation. In large communities, it is very difficult to involve everyone in discussion of every issue. A corollary of the arithmetic problem is radical decentralisation. As Warren (2002) suggests, devolution may open spaces for participatory opportunities. Pateman (1970) also contends that the role of the citizen will always be highly restricted in national politics given the size of national political units. However, this does not mean that more local autonomy automatically brings more democracy (Pratchett, 2004). It has to be supported by other institutional arrangements.

Another concern is related to difficulties in reaching a consensus or even a majority. As Pennock (1979) suggests, differences of opinion may be such that no discussion can be held and no decision can be reached. This may lead to a deadlock in decision-making.

Reaching a decision would be even more difficult in technical matters about which the participants have very limited knowledge. This whole process of participation, both its conduct and evaluation, may increase the costs substantially. The DETR (1998a) report demonstrates that increase in costs is a barrier for local authorities, especially for those wishing to implement more complicated and expensive styles of participation. The ODPM (2002) report on participation in local government also reveals that the main problems for local authorities attempting to implement participation are lack of resources and time.

Social and political inequalities cause both a normative and a practical concern. According to Beetham (1996), participation should serve the dual principles of democracy: popular control and political equality. These principles are meaningful as long as they support and complement each other. Increased participation can be a threat to democracy when it is not distributed equally among different sections of the society. Pratchett (2002) identifies such a contradiction in the implementation of these principles. He suggests that increasing popular control with more participation can militate against political equality because of differences in the distribution of and access to civic skills. Even if participation initiatives are open to everyone, this does not mean that everyone has the same capacity, resources and motivation to participate. Anne Philips (1994) puts the dilemma of participation so well as to deserve a lengthy quotation:

Arguments over participation *therefore* involve two opposing appeals to the principle of political equality. On the one hand, there is an argument for wider participation, which stresses that power will otherwise be concentrated in the hands of a social and economic elite, and sees participation as a way of redressing this imbalance. On the other hand, there is an argument against wider participation, which sees it as disempowering a silent majority, and transferring power to another (perhaps more dangerous) elite. Any argument for greater political participation has to engage in some way with this worry (emphasis original, p. 11).

Empirical evidence too shows that most of the existing participation comes from a small but active segment of the society (Parry et al, 1992). This very fact is another barrier for the implementation of more participatory politics. If the elected and appointed elites suspect that they are giving voice to the same group of people, they may avoid

participation initiatives or ignore the results of those initiatives for being unrepresentative and parochial.

In summary, participation is an important principle of democracy, although the relationship between participation and democracy is not self-evident. Participation is meaningful when it is considered as a dual principle with political equality. However, conceptualising democracy as a set of certain principles may be problematic. First, there is no set of principles of democracy which cannot be contested on reasonable grounds. The above discussion about arguments for and against participation demonstrates how different theorists of democracy attribute different roles to participation. While Pateman (1970) contends that participation is essential for democracy, Schumpeter (1976) does not recognise any scope for participation beyond the ballot box. Secondly, and even more importantly, as Michael Saward (2003) argues these principles are only meaningful through their enactment by institutions, devices and practices that might embody and bring the principles to life. This research takes this point seriously. In fact, by taking a meso level approach, the research aims to understand the *procedures and practices* through which principles (participation and equality) are enacted.

Although Saward's (2003) point about the essentially contested nature of all sets of principles may be valid, there has also been a very influential tradition within democratic theory emphasising participation as a principle of democracy from ancient Greek philosophy to Western liberal tradition. The next section explores how this principle is incorporated in different models of democracy.

The role of participation within different models of democracy

Although participation is a major theme in democratic theory, its significance varies in different models of democracy. The place of participation within different models of democracy has been extensively studied (see for example Held, 1996). However, Michael Saward (2003) argues that democratic theory needs to benefit from a fresh view that focuses on the way democracy is 'enacted' rather than formulating yet another model of democracy. Anne Phillips (1994) is also concerned with identifying different 'forms and mechanisms' for 'making democracy work' (p. 16). Therefore, the use of

models here is for analytical purposes only and is not intended as a contribution to the normative debate about the value of existing or proposed models. The models do not have to exist in reality; they are *constructed* to demonstrate how modes and volume of participation may be incorporated differently in different democratic settings. The introduction of these models helps in two respects. First, it helps to explore the role of participation within different models and to demonstrate the ambiguities of the relationship between participation and democracy. Second, as will be seen in the subsequent chapters, proponents of electronic democracy advocate different models of democracy. Therefore, developing these models at this point will help in identifying any developments towards alternative models of democracy with the use of the Internet.

The role of participation is considered within four models of democracy: direct, deliberative representative and consumer. This is not an exhaustive list of possible models. Academic literature is full of different models such as associative democracy (Hirst, 1994), strong democracy (Barber, 1984), pluralist democracy (Dahl, 1967) and so on. These four models are chosen/constructed on the basis of the different volumes and styles of participation they incorporate. Although consumer democracy is not a model discussed by classical theorists, it has become a common conceptualisation especially with regard to developments towards New Public Management and developments in the technology (see for example, Bellamy and Taylor, 1998; Bellamy, 2000).

Both *direct* and *deliberative* models fall under a participatory theory of democracy which can be traced back to ancient Greece and which has been taken up more recently by numerous proponents such as J. J. Rousseau (1968), J. S. Mill (1910), Carole Pateman (1970) and Benjamin Barber (1984). For this theory of democracy, government by the people implies the maximum possible participation of citizens in shaping policies. However, the two models depart from each other in terms of the style/mode of participation that they are based upon. Still, the distinction between direct and deliberative models is more analytical than practical. For contemporary theorists and practitioners of direct democracy and the use of referendums, the deliberative component of debate in public spaces is fundamental to the experience.

Although, the idea of deliberation is not entirely new (antecedents can be found in the ancient Greek city-states), the term deliberative was given impetus especially by Bernard Manin (1987) and Joshua Cohen (1989). The emphasis on the deliberative component of participatory democracy was further accentuated as part of the discussions about how the technology can be used to enhance democracy. One fraction of the debate has concentrated on methods such as televoting (previously by cable television and more recently by the Internet), while another fraction explored the way these technologies can be used to enhance political deliberation. In short, the distinction between direct and deliberative models of democracy is a relatively new phenomenon compared to the discussion between participatory and representative models.

In the *direct democracy* model, citizens participate directly in political decision-making. The will of the majority directly influences decisions. Representation is usually seen as a practical necessity and something to be avoided if possible. Individuals are seen as being just as intelligent as the political elite. Therefore, professional politicians and political parties become less important. Having frequent referendums at the national and the local levels is one of the most important practices of direct democracy. Participation in the workplace and participation at the local level are central to this model (Pateman, 1970).

In the *deliberative democracy* model, there is more emphasis on public debate. Political participation does not take place in a vacuum. Although the liberal/individualist conceptions of democracy consider participation as an individual act independent from the rest of society, participation takes place within a public realm. Democracy requires the existence of a 'public sphere' that is independent of governmental and commercial interests and in which rational-critical debate can take place (Habermas, 1962). This model is based on the notion that common concerns are dealt with through ongoing discussions, debates and deliberations. The assumption behind this model is that people may be convinced to agree to others' suggestions through rational deliberation. The source of legitimacy of the decisions is not the predetermined will of individuals but rather the process of its formation through deliberation. The preferred methods of participation are those that allow the maximum opportunity for deliberation such as

forums and citizen juries. According to Dryzek (2000), a strong advocate of this model, “the essence of democracy itself is now widely taken to be deliberation, as opposed to voting, interest aggregation, constitutional rights or even self-government” (p. 1).

In the *representative democracy model*, only the political elite participate fully in the political processes. For Schumpeter (1976), the ordinary citizen is not particularly interested in politics. Instead, there are competing political elites who are selected through elections. After that, there is a division of labour between politicians and the electorate. The political elite should have sufficient distance from the electorate to make rational decisions. The main practice for citizen participation is open and free elections. However, unlike Schumpeter (1976), Beetham (1996) believes that elections cannot guarantee that people have control over decisions and that decision-makers are responsive and representative. There must be more channels between the elected and the electors in order to keep a continuous flow of interaction and to ensure the representativeness of opinion. Beetham (1996) argues that representative democracy involves participation by citizens as part of a continuous process of exchange. Representation cannot be ensured with the single act of election. It is a process involving representatives and citizens in mutual sharing of information and views. Therefore, participation is not an alternative to representative democracy; it is a necessary condition.

The *consumer democracy* model rests on an instrumental and utilitarian understanding of the relation between citizens and the government. This model values public information only in relation to the citizen’s stake in the delivery of public services. Citizens are largely excluded from ‘high politics’ affairs such as the national economy and international relations. Their participation is mostly channelled within a relatively narrow set of vertical administrative arrangements concerned with the relatively ‘low’ politics of public service delivery and operational management (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998, Ch. 4). Consumerism epitomises the old saw that ‘information is power’ and promotes principles such as choice, access, redress and voice, all of which are enhanced by access to more and better information (Bellamy, 2000, pp. 40-41). This model values

market survey techniques, such as complaint schemes, as a mode of democratic participation.

As mentioned before, these models are abstract constructs. The practice of democracy relies upon different mixtures of different procedures, mechanisms and principles originating from different models. Moreover, each model has weaknesses and strengths in terms of citizen participation. Direct democracy can be criticised for reducing the collective good to predetermined individual wills. The deliberative model, on the other hand, can be criticised for putting too much emphasis on deliberation as opposed to decision-making. Likewise, the consumer democracy model can be criticised for reducing political participation to expression of concerns about public services. Models differ in their capacity to provide equal opportunities for participation. While direct democracy ensures the participation of the maximum number of people (width), the deliberative model enables a more meaningful participation (depth) at the expense of the exclusion of many.

In short, as Anne Phillips (1994) suggests, the distinction between participatory and representative models of democracy is a false distinction. There is no single model, which stands before the others. Instead, there is a range of legitimate possibilities of participation. This research adapts Beetham's (1996) understanding of representative democracy, which perceives participation as part of a continuous relation between citizens and representatives. Within this model, different modes of participation can be employed in order to realise the dual principles of political control and political equality. In fact, empirical evidence shows that local authorities have been combining various modes of participation that may potentially support alternative models of democracy (DETR, 1998a; Lowndes et al, 2001a). Developments towards alternative models of democracy will be discussed in relation to the democratic renewal programme in the last part of this chapter.

So far, the chapter has been concerned with conceptualising participation and explaining its complicated role within democratic theory and practice. Despite the significance attributed to participation at a normative level and its benefits at a practical level (which

are discussed above in relation to instrumental, developmental, liberal and communitarian outcomes), not everyone will avail him or herself of the opportunity to participate. The next section analyses theories explaining participation and non-participation. The purpose is to reveal if there is any scope for facilitating participation from the top.

EXPLAINING PARTICIPATION: FOCUSING ON THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

It is important to analyse the reasons for participation and non-participation in order to reveal if there is scope for local government to increase participation and to evaluate whether the use of the Internet would be useful in facilitating participation. If non-participation is due to a lack of channels for participation or due to a lack of encouragement from the top, there may be scope for local government to increase participation. Likewise, if people do not participate because they find it difficult, then there may be scope for using the Internet to make participation more convenient and attractive.

So what causes non-participation? Is it simply the result of a lack of interest among citizens, or is it due to a lack of top-down mobilisation? For Brady et al (1995), people do not participate either “because they can’t, they don’t want to or nobody asked”. They point at the importance of capacity, motivation and mobilisation for participation to take place. Some may even argue that non-participation signals a level of happiness with the working of the system and that there is no need to worry. Thompson (1960) opposes the idea that people are apathetic about public affairs because their prosperity leaves no room for discontent. This argument is problematic in two senses. First of all, many studies show that disappearing voters are not evenly distributed across the population and less well off people are becoming increasingly excluded (Geddes, 1995). Secondly, this assumption can be abused by governments who could use it as an excuse to behave independently of the citizens and to justify all their acts on the ground that there is no objection from the citizens and that they are indeed happy with whatever the

government is doing. Although there may be some element of truth in this claim, there is a need to analyse carefully possible reasons for non-participation.

Political theorists have identified a number of different accounts of what might lead people participate or not. Although each model has particular strengths in explaining or predicting participation, none of them answers why a particular person in a particular instance decides to participate. One possible solution is to develop a framework that enables the researcher to see the role of macro, meso and micro variables in explaining participation. Norris (2001b) suggests that political participation can best be explained by a combination of related factors operating at these three levels.

This part reviews the dominant explanatory theories in relation to these three levels. This categorisation reveals a clear dominance of micro explanations. There are far fewer theories to explain the influences of macro and meso level factors on modes, scope and level of participation and non-participation. However, evidence shows that the organisation of politics appears to make a difference (Parry et al, 1992) and there may be scope to affect levels and styles of participation. Focusing merely on micro variables may lead to bypassing the role of political institutions. In fact, this is one of the starting points of this research. One such meso-level institution is local government and the research asks whether there is scope for local government to affect citizen participation.

Micro level explanations

Theories that fall into this category focus on the capacity, ideas, interests, and motivations of individuals. *Rational actor theory* (Goodin and Dryzek, 1980) focuses on the costs and benefits to the individual that are associated with active political participation. Participation is explained in relation to individuals' ambition to achieve personal rewards or collective policy outcomes. Because people have different levels of interest in different issues, they may choose to participate on some issues and abstain from others. As a result, a diverse range of 'issue publics' emerge that are active over different issues.

The *socio-economic status model* (Verba and Nie, 1972) focuses on the civic attitudes that certain people develop which predispose them to participate. Their upbringing and personal environment encourage the development of skills and resources which are conducive to political interest and involvement (Parry et al, 1992). These attitudes involve both an interest in and knowledge of politics as well as a sense of political efficacy. *Civic voluntarism theory* (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995) goes beyond the SES model. It also focuses on whether individuals have the personal resources necessary to engage in political participation. What distinguishes this theory from the SES model is that it seeks to establish the mechanisms that link SES to participation. Accordingly, individuals gain civic skills in non-political institutions and networks of recruitment. The possession of these individual and group resources is the key predictor of political participation (Verba and Nie, 1972; Parry et al, 1992).

Social movement theory focuses on expressive motivations for political participation. People may act to express their feelings or display their stance about a matter. Their activity is an expression of their political identity (Parry et al, 1992, p. 15). They are not necessarily concerned with directly achieving a goal, whether individual or collective. However, their act may have an instrumentalist aspect as well. Although their activities are mostly symbolic, they may achieve some outcomes or benefits. *Communitarian theory* (Barber, 1984) focuses on concern for the community as a motivation for participation. The basic argument is that “where people are highly integrated into the local community, and where they identify strongly with it, participation would be greater” (Parry et al 1992, p. 13). In such circumstances, people understand local needs and problems, recognise their interdependence with others, and seek to act collectively to sustain communal values and relationships.

In short, micro-level theories explain participation and non-participation by reference to the capacity, interest and motivation of the individual. As such, these theories leave little scope for governments or other institutions to shape participation.

Macro level explanations

Macro influences can be analysed as socio-economic contexts as well as national political institutions. They are important in explaining participation because they have a direct impact on the above-mentioned micro level variables as well as on organisations that have a scope in affecting participation. Macro impacts may shape people's interests, ideas and motivation. If we take socio-economic context as an example, changes in the economy and employment patterns would mean diminishing participation through trade unions or increasing participation from women. Processes of social modernisation have gradually altered many dimensions of participation, such as the modes, scope and issue-agenda (Norris, 2001b). Some of the trends, such as increases in levels of education, leisure and affluence, are normally expected to increase participation. However, other trends associated with post-industrialist societies may depress traditional state-oriented forms of activism. This may lead to alternative modes of participation. On one hand, there is declining party membership and declining attendance in unions and churches. On the other hand, there is greater concern for and participation in issues such as environmentalism and human rights.

Such macro influences not only affect the mode and scope of participation. They may also affect the very decision to participate or not. The *relative deprivation model* (Goodin and Dryzek, 1980), for example, suggests that as a result of increasing education and affluence, citizens' expectations have risen. They have a greater wish to express political demands and a greater capacity to do so. However, their perception of governments' competence has decreased. The result is decreasing confidence in the political system and the belief that it is not worth participating.

Macro influences are not only limited to socio-economic factors. The structure of opportunities for participation is shaped by rules of the political game such as electoral system, degree of pluralism, and the existence of political rights and civil liberties (Norris, 2001b). Political institutions are particularly important in providing channels for participation, responding to participation and actively encouraging participation. However, their role has been relatively neglected because they were generally accepted as a constant variable in explaining participation (Parry et al, 1992; Putnam, 1993). The

role of such institutions is most easily demonstrated with cross-national comparative research. However, even within the same political system or a single country, there are variations between volume and modes of participation. For example, in the UK, both electoral and non-electoral participation rates vary across localities (Rallings et al, 1994; Parry et al, 1992; Lowndes et al, 2002). This suggests that macro-level theories are not sufficient to explain participation and non-participation. There are other variables operating at a meso level and affecting the style and level of participation.

Meso level explanations

Meso level theories give greater weight to the role of agencies and social networks in engaging people. These arrangements include formal organisations such as elected local authorities, political parties, unions and media as well as informal networks such as neighbourhood groups and voluntary associations. The idea of social networks facilitating participation has become a very popular one with the work of Robert Putnam. He has popularised the theory of social capital (1993) focusing on “features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit” (p. 67). According to him, all kinds of voluntary associations, community groups and private organisations providing face-to-face meetings contribute towards a rich and dense civic network with high levels of trust. This in turn leads to higher levels of participation. However, he does not explain the mechanisms through which levels of trust and reciprocity turn into participation. Rubenson (2000), for example, suggests that trust may also lead to non-participation when individuals believe that other members would make the right decisions.

The most important criticism against social capital theory for the purpose of this research is its neglect of political institutions. Levi (1996) argues that this theory is “too society-centred to the neglect of other important actors, most notably those in government” (p. 50). This line of argument is pursued by some authors who are interested in revealing the role of government itself in stimulating social capital and civic engagement (Maloney et al 2000; Lowndes and Wilson, 2001). Their work shows that levels and patterns of public involvement relate to the design and implementation of

participation initiatives as well as the capacity of local authority decision-makers to respond to the results of participation. Lowndes and Wilson (2001) suggest, “Governments (particularly at the local level) shape the conditions in which voluntary associations – and social networks more generally - thrive (or do not)” (p. 631). Drawing upon the theory of political opportunity structure, Maloney et al (2000) also argue that local government can directly or indirectly influence the opportunities for voluntary organisations. The political opportunity structure is defined by Tarrow (1994) as “consistent – but not necessarily formal and permanent - dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations of success and failure” (cited in Uhm Seung-Yong and Hague, 2001, p. 12). The distribution of power within and between political institutions affects the political opportunity structures. For example, Maloney et al (2000) argue that the configuration of power among senior officers and between departments may create cleavages and divisions that can create access points which can be identified and exploited by voluntary associations. Hence, the “political opportunity structure is a significant factor shaping both the absolute level of participation and the specific directions it takes within a particular polity” (Parry et al, 1992, p. 8).

Participation is a complicated phenomenon that can be explained only by a combination of variables. Most of the explanatory theories focus on micro variables related to the capacity, interest and motivation of the individual. Macro explanations, on the other hand, focus on socio-economic developments as well as national political institutions. This research builds on a less examined aspect of participation that concentrates on the role of top-down interventions from the local government. If local authorities are able to affect the levels of participation, then it may be possible to counteract the decreasing levels of participation through institutional design. Local government has an important role because, at least in theory, it is an institution that is easily accessible to citizens with many relevant responsibilities for them. The role of local government is discussed next.

A role for local government

Normative theories of local government argue that it enhances citizens' political education and contributes to an informed and vibrant society (Hill, 1974). Stoker (1994, 1996) suggests that local government should be valued above all as a site for political activity. Local government has 'democratic primacy' over central government "because it does enable more people to participate in their own government" (Sharpe, 1970, p. 160). The regularity of local elections coupled with a multiplicity of other participation methods also contributes to this primacy. It gives voice and expression to the distinctiveness of local communities (Wilson and Game, 2002, p. 40). Empirical evidence strongly supports the normative suggestion that the local government facilitates and encourages participation (Parry et al, 1992; Verba et al, 1995).

Local authorities are responsible for the provision of a number of services. Yet, they are also political institutions that draw their power from local elections. Different emphases can be given to the role of local government within the parameters of national legislation and political context. Local government can be seen merely as a body to provide local services. For example, Jackson (1958) wrote "local government is essentially a method of getting services run for the benefit of the community" (p. 1 cited in Stewart, 2000, p. 26). They can also be seen as political institutions constituted for local self-government that goes beyond service provision. The Widdicombe Committee (1986) denies that service delivery is the only role of the local government.

It is not a necessary element of local government that it should itself deliver services...But it is necessary that local government should allow a local view to be expressed through the taking of decisions. For this reason, the mere delivery of services is not itself sufficient to constitute local government (emphasis added, p. 52).

Therefore, local government has a political function, which is the management and resolution of conflict that arises out of the issues involved in the public provision of goods and services.

An important section of the discussion in relation to the role of local government is clustered around the dichotomy between the service delivery and the democratic roles of local government. However, as Pratchett (1999a) notes, it is rather the ability of local

authorities to deliver some measure of its roles and to balance the potential tensions between them, that makes elected local government uniquely and eminently suitable to claim a legitimate place (p. 738).

The way local authorities perceive their roles - as primarily a service delivery body or a local democracy agent – has immense implications in terms of their strategy regarding participation. This self-perception has an impact on the shape of the participatory framework that is desired by the local authority. A local authority emphasising the role of local government in local democracy is more likely to welcome participation *per se*, whilst a local authority emphasising its role as service deliverer is more likely to welcome participation in service related issues using certain methods such as consumer surveys. Elected local authorities consult individuals for instrumental purposes such as collecting information about consumer choices or for more developmental reasons such as enhancing communities. Local government is responsible for providing local services while at the same time functioning as a vehicle for participation and a ground for practicing citizenship. However, there have been shifts between the relative significance of these roles. The following part reviews such shifts from a historical perspective.

THE TREND FOR LOCAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE UK

The reform of local government in the UK must be understood as a continuous process. Within this process, interest in political participation has waxed and waned with periods of intense interest and others of disillusionment (Young, 1986). Public participation in the UK started to gain importance, especially in the context of planning, after the call of the Skeffington Committee and the Town and County Planning Act (1971) for more public involvement. The next major development towards greater citizen involvement took place in 1991 when the Conservative Party launched the Citizen's Charter White Paper. Although the mechanisms of this initiative (such as privatisation, competition, contracting out or performance-related pay) was criticised for providing little scope for the direct involvement of individuals (Prior, 1995), this was nevertheless a step towards more citizen engagement. In 1993, an independent commission, the Commission for Local Democracy (CLD), started to inquire about the nature and future of local

government in England and Wales. This signified a concern about the role of local government. Apart from the suggestions related to the status and organisation of local government, there was a call for the enhancement of active citizenship and intensified political activity within localities.

The next major step in the history of participation at the local level is the Labour Party's victory in the 1997 general elections, which started a 'democratic renewal' programme for local government. Since 1997, public involvement has been a common theme of the reform initiatives. Among several white papers, 'Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People' (DETR, 1998b) is the most comprehensive; it pointed to a need to "strengthen direct accountability to local people" through the consultation of local people, referendums, more frequent elections and easier methods of voting. Later, the Local Government Act 2000 set up new political structures within local government aiming to achieve greater efficiency, transparency and accountability in the council decision making process. Another white paper, 'Strong Leadership, Quality Public Services' (DTLR, 2001), also demanded that councils allow more input from citizens.

According to Gray and Jenkins (1999), the democratic renewal programme is part of New Labour's programme for constitutional reform to counteract the erosion of democracy through the strengthening of citizens rights and obligations, bringing decision making closer to people and improving representative and legislative systems. However, research shows that, even before this programme, there had been an increase in local government efforts in initiating participatory methods, especially since 1995 (DETR, 1998a). This was partly because of a concern about a democratic deficit characterised by declining party membership and activism as well as electoral turnout. There are suggestions that it was also a defence strategy of local authorities against reorganisation of local government (Pratchett, 1999c).

There are four key elements in the democratic renewal programme as addressed in The White Paper, 'Modern Local Government' (DETR, 1998b). First is a set of proposals to improve the electoral process and to increase electoral turnout. The second element is a set of proposals to enhance public participation in local government by encouraging

local government to develop a range of consultation and participation techniques between the elections. The final two elements are related to improvements in political management through an executive - assembly split and the extension of local autonomy and community leadership.

It can be argued that a combination of factors such as decreasing electoral turnouts, declining civic culture, increasing perception gap between local authorities and their citizens and concerns about providing better services all contributed to the formulation of the democratic renewal programme. The welcome that the programme received in different authorities can also be explained by a number of factors. Some authorities perceived it as an opportunity to legitimise their stance, some were more concerned to become more responsive to citizen demand and to provide better services, others, who already had a tradition of intensive participation initiatives, welcomed it as a continuation of their policies. Research shows that there are great variations among local authorities in their implementation and perception of the democratic renewal programme in general, and political participation in particular (DETR, 1998a; ODPM, 2002).

Although at a superficial level the democratic renewal programme appears to be a set of practical responses to certain problems such as declining electoral turnout, it also refers to more 'systemic failings' in the working of the representative democracy (Pratchett, 1999c, p. 2). According to this view, "problems at the local level do not simply indicate failure in the institutions of local government but are symptomatic of wider failings in democratic culture and practice" (Pratchett, 1999c, p. 6). Hence, the problem is not only about the formal institutions of local government; it also involves the gap between citizens and the institutions of government. In this respect, democratic renewal is not only about changing the structures and functions of local government, but also about changing the expectations and behaviour of citizens.

The democratic renewal programme cannot be understood in isolation from other aspects of the modernisation agenda of the Labour government. There is agreement in the policy and academic field that the agenda has a dual emphasis on democratic

renewal and continuous service improvement. The commitment to improving public services is made obvious by the emphasis that is placed on the development of a 'Best Value' regime, as well as the development of later initiatives such as Local Strategic Partnerships, Public Service Agreements, Comprehensive Performance Assessment and electronic delivery of services. The Best Value regime, which is defined as the Labour Party's flagship policy for local government (Lowndes and Wilson, 2003), requires all local authorities to produce Best Value Performance Plans for each of their services to be inspected by the Audit Commission. As part of the Best Value regime, local authorities are required to consult citizens for their services. Wilson (2001) suggests that public participation is at the heart of the Best Value agenda. Revising the Best Value, a new inspection regime that is based on the assessment of overall performance of the local authorities as well as their performances on individual services, was launched. This regime, called Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), builds on existing inspection and performance assessments to make a comparison among local authorities in terms of their individual service performances and overall management. Another initiative to improve local service delivery, Public Service Agreements, enable all county authorities and single-tier authorities to negotiate directly with the central government departments in order to agree on specific ways of meeting service delivery targets. More recently, there has been commitment to electronic service delivery as part of the modernisation of local government. This will be discussed in more detail in the next Chapter.

The purpose at this point is not to discuss in detail policy developments with regard to the modernisation of services. However, as will be discussed throughout the thesis, the dual emphasis of the modernisation agenda on democratic renewal and modernisation of public services seem to be *intertwined*. This is particularly true for the use of the Internet. As will be discussed in the next chapter, it seems that there is a dual emphasis to use the Internet both for improving service delivery and enhancing democracy.

After providing a brief account of the policy developments concerning political participation in particular and the modernisation of local government in general, it is useful to identify the major themes and tensions that run through these developments. In

this way, it is possible to take a step away from merely describing the policy developments towards identifying major issues relevant for the purposes of the research. There are a number of implicit tensions which militate against local authorities continuing to experiment with public participation. These tensions will be investigated in relation to managerial and democratic purposes, the tension between participatory and representative models of democracy, top-down and bottom-up elements of the agenda, and finally the dilemma of participation and inclusion.

Managerial and democratic tendencies

As discussed above, the modernisation agenda of the Labour government has a dual emphasis on democratic renewal and the improvement of public services. It is important to understand the 'values' that underpin this agenda of change. Analysis of the modernisation agenda reveals that it is underpinned by a commitment to high quality services, vibrant local democracy and social inclusion. The reform programme diffuses values such as 'modern', 'efficient', 'partnership', 'participation' and 'social inclusion' among local authorities.

There is a risk that, among these values, service improvement will take precedence over democratic renewal on the grounds that it is easier to produce tangible evidence on progress towards better services. It is also easier to justify the costs of service delivery initiatives. By contrast, local authorities may find it difficult to demonstrate their progress in enhancing public participation especially when they use qualitative methods of participating. This may potentially lead to tokenism where local authorities try to demonstrate that they make progress on both sides of the reform programme when in fact public participation is marginalized in their work.

Local authorities are expected to meet various targets set either by themselves or by the central government. Within this wide range of reform initiatives, Leach and Wingfield (1999) argue that local authorities will have to make choices, which may not be absolute choices but certainly choices of emphasis. They suggest that there are real concerns over the extent to which political participation will become marginalized in the race to

implement other more tangible elements of the modernisation agenda. Pratchett (2002) also suggests that “as local authorities have sought to respond to the wide range of modernisation initiatives, enhanced public participation as a feature of democratic renewal seems to have lost its resonance in much of the reform agenda” (p. 333). Comparing the first and second terms of Labour government, Lowndes and Wilson (2003), suggest that the values underpinning the reform programme have become obscure and confused where managerial values are taking precedence over democratic values (p. 296). Making the same comparison between the two terms in government, Pratchett (2002) also argues that interest in democratic renewal appears to be waning.

It is important to reveal the underlying values behind the reform programme because it is likely that dominant values will also affect the way the Internet is used in the public sector including local government. The emphasis on improving public services is relevant when it comes to the use of the Internet too. As the next chapter will suggest, the use of the Internet in the UK is predominantly sought for managerial and service-related outcomes rather than for enhancing participation or democratic renewal in general.

The tension between participatory and representative democracy

Enhanced public participation implies an injection of participatory democracy into the local body politic (Leach and Wingfield, 1999). Although there are arguments that enhanced participation between elections is compatible with, and even a component of, representative democracy (Beetham, 1996), there is also a very strong counter-argument that enhanced participation may undermine the functioning of representative democracy (Schumpeter, 1976). The tension between representative and participatory democracy is not a new one and there have always been arguments against citizens’ participation (see previous part of this chapter). However, what makes this paradox an important policy issue is threefold. First, the normative argument around participatory and representative models of democracy is reproduced in the policy context as well. Second, these normative arguments against participation bring the risk of undermining the vision for a more participatory democracy. Third, the paradox indicates that enhancing participation

is not only about injecting some practical participation initiatives into the existing representative system. There are inherent tensions between these two models, which require special consideration for reconciliation. It is essential to provide a framework within which enhanced participation can become part of the working of representative democracy. The current policy context seems to provide neither the policy tools nor the normative ground for this reconciliation between participatory and representative models of democracy.

This tension is reflected particularly among elected members within local authorities. Many councillors perceive participation initiatives as a threat to their representative role. In the current context, councillors think that, especially when combined with the executive-assembly split, their role is diminished to representation without power (Leach and Wingfield, 1999). This concern is crucial because it may lead councils to pay lip service to participation demands of the central government without devolving any power to citizens. In fact, research shows that there is a gap between the results of the consultation/participation efforts and their impact on final decisions. Therefore, there is a need to determine the place of these initiatives in the spectrum of representative - participatory democracy.

Although the democratic renewal programme seems to be based primarily upon a representative democracy model, there are also suggestions that the programme actually “draws upon different components of direct, consultative, deliberative and representative democracy to create a new democratic order” (Pratchett, 1999c, p. 9). The newly emerging use of referendums, especially with regard to reform in the political management structure, is a signal of the emphasis now placed on direct democracy. There is also an increasing use of deliberative methods such as focus groups, citizen’s juries and visioning exercises. A majority of the local authorities have included some kind of deliberative participation, although again there are great variations among local authorities and they still lag behind traditional and consumerist consultation processes (DETR, 1998a; Lowndes et al, 2001a; Leach and Wingfield, 1999).

Despite developments with regard to the use of the components of direct and deliberative democracy models, the policy context in the UK is still predominantly engaged with supporting and supplementing the institutions of representative democracy rather than radically changing it. However, even within the representative democracy model, there may be some developments towards direct or deliberative models of democracy.

Top-down and bottom-up tendencies

The modernisation agenda for local government has exhibited an 'evolutionary' aspect, since participatory efforts have been on the local authorities' agenda for a long time. However, there is also an element of 'intentional intervention' from the central government. The interventionist and top-down element interacts with the evolutionary and bottom-up element of change in local government. The role of top-down and bottom-up elements of the modernisation programme and the central-local relations in general has been studied extensively (Wilson, 2001). Here, the purpose is to focus on the role of top-down and bottom-up elements in the development of the agenda specifically on public participation.

Consulting the public has become a statutory duty for local authorities. However, local diversity and choice is clear when it comes to the importance and priority given by councils to involving the public and stakeholders in the policy process (Copus, 2000, p. 177). It is possible to observe both processes of homogenisation in which all local authorities are pushed to incorporate public consultation in their work, and processes of variation in which each local authority develops its own approach to public participation. The homogenisation process is enhanced by the fact that local authorities are dependent on central government for resources. A framework of rewards and incentives for local authorities can serve to stimulate political participation. Central government also affects local authorities' attitude towards, and implementation of, public participation indirectly by the creation of public participation as a dominant norm. This will be discussed in more detail under 'normative isomorphism' in chapters 5 and 8. Diffusion of certain practices and norms associated with public participation is

further accelerated by national umbrella organisations such as the Local Government Association. According to Brooks (2000), this is a form of 'implicit regulation' (p. 599) in which the central government makes use of third party agencies in constructing and disseminating good practice models. In short, it is possible to claim that central government plays a top-down role in enhancing public participation through mechanisms such as resource distribution and a framework for incentives and punishments.

However, it would be unfair to explain the development of participatory initiatives at the local level merely by reference to a push from the top. Indeed, a significant number of councils have a long tradition of public consultation extending their statutory responsibilities (Copus, 2000, p. 177). Research shows that even before the launch of the democratic renewal programme, there had been an increase in local government efforts to initiate participatory methods especially since 1995 (DETR, 1998a). This was partly because of a concern about a democratic deficit characterised by declining party membership and activism as well as electoral turnout. It is possible to suggest that there is a fine balance between the top-down and bottom-up elements of the democratic renewal programme. The disruption of this balance resulting from a shift in emphasis toward top-down considerations is potentially problematic. First, if local authorities do not perceive public participation as part and parcel of their job, their participatory initiatives may be limited to tokenism. Second, actors within local authorities complain that there is already a consultation overload having a negative impact on their work (ODPM, 2002). Third, small local authorities are disadvantaged in terms of having insufficient resources to carry out extensive consultation. In short, local factors need to be taken into consideration within calls for more extensive public participation.

There are signs that attitudes towards, and implementation of, public participation by local authorities are not totally determined by central government. Despite the central drive for the enhancement of public participation, research evidence shows that there is a wide gap between those authorities that seek actively to encourage public participation and those that are indifferent towards it (DETR, 1998a; Pratchett, 2000). There is also a suggestion that, since public participation is relatively less frequently prescribed by

legislative requirements, there is a danger that the enterprise of enhancing public participation could easily be marginalized (Wilson, 2001).

In short, the public participation agenda is shaped both by top-down and bottom-up elements. As will be discussed in the next chapter, this is also relevant for those strategies seeking to use the Internet for political participation.

Participation and inclusion

There is also a tension within the policy context between the desire that public participation should be 'balanced' and 'representative' and the reality that it is often unbalanced and unrepresentative (Leach and Wingfield, 1999). The paradox of participation and equality has been discussed as a normative issue in this chapter. Results of many empirical studies confirm that there is in fact a situation where patterns of social exclusion are reproduced and where certain groups of people are systematically excluded from participating (DETR, 1998a). There is a real danger that the more articulate and vocal groups of people will capture the agenda of participation and dominate the participation initiatives. Research evidence shows that local authorities experience difficulty in engaging certain citizens, particularly those from ethnic minorities and young people (ODPM, 2002). These difficulties prompt the authorities to experiment with a variety of initiatives in order to discover which generates the highest levels of response (ODPM, 2002). Local authorities also initiate programmes for capacity building and training in order to equip local citizens with the skills and confidence to take part in politics. Lack of citizen interest in participation and the hijacking of participatory initiatives by the same people can potentially lead to a reduction in the range of such participation initiatives. Actors within local authorities may abstain from opening further participation channels if they believe there to be an insufficient level of public interest in participating.

This problem is recognised by the government and it constitutes a significant theme within the modernisation agenda. The White Paper 'Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People' (DETR, 1998b) states social exclusion as one of the major

challenges facing modern Britain at the end of the twentieth century. The paper suggests that responding to this challenge will require concerted action at local and national level. In order to address this problem, the Social Exclusion Unit was set up to help to develop policies to reduce social exclusion.

The issue of participation and inclusion becomes an even bigger problem in the context of electronic participation considering that the Internet is more likely to advantage those who are already advantaged in terms of income, skills and access to political links all of which are important predictors of participation. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this chapter has been to introduce local participation as the object of analysis. The chapter provided a conceptual clarification both by presenting a definition of participation for the purposes of *this* study, and by considering the limitations of that definition. Accordingly, the kind of participation that is of interest in this research is understood as:

- Top-down initiated by elected local authorities
- Participation beyond elections
- Vertical rather than horizontal communication
- Contacting as the main mode
- Participation within representative democracy without proposing a radical model of participatory democracy
- A range of participation activities without proposing a hierarchy between them
- Primarily online participation, however offline participation is important too
- The *strategy* on participation rather than outcomes in terms of take up levels by citizens

Having conceptualised participation, the chapter then discussed the relation between participation and democracy, especially by benefiting from Beetham's (1996) dual

principles of popular control and political equality. The chapter argued that the relation between participation and democracy is not a straightforward one. There is a paradox whereby an increase in participation may potentially lead to further exclusion of certain groups of people. This problem is exacerbated when the new technologies are employed for participation purposes. This will be discussed in the next chapter. The chapter also discussed the role of participation within different models of democracy. The purpose of the research is to analyse the role of participation within a system of representative democracy without engaging in a normative debate on the value of alternative models. However, one of the purposes of the research is to identify developments toward alternative models of democracy either as a result of the changing policy context, or through the use of the Internet as a way of supporting different models.

Having reviewed different explanatory theories of participation, the chapter argued that there is a potential role for local authorities to play in affecting the mode and volume of participation. Both the service delivery and political functions of local government make it a suitable ground for participation. Finally, the chapter reviewed the agenda for political participation since the 1960s in order to contextualise the contemporary developments within a historical process. Within this agenda, four themes that are relevant for the purposes of the research have been identified. The policy context in the UK in the 2000s appears to rest primarily on managerial rather than democratic purposes. Within this context, there are both top-down and bottom-up elements that shape attitudes towards and implementation of public participation. The participation agenda is also characterised by a tension between participatory and representative models of democracy which is hard to reconcile. Finally, the normative concern about the paradox of participation and inclusion is also an important policy issue that demands consideration.

Within the policy context of these tensions, elected local authorities have been experimenting with new modes of participation, which includes the use of the Internet. The next chapter analyses the specific ways in which the Internet can be used for the enhancement of participation.

CHAPTER 3

THE INTERNET, PARTICIPATION AND ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable speculation about the possible contribution of the Internet to democracy. Suggestions range from the creation of a virtual public sphere (Schalken, 2000) and the expansion of opportunities to enhance civil liberties (Percy Smith, 1995), to increased accountability (Hague and Loader, 1999), associational activity (Klein, 1999) and participation (White, 1997; Lenk, 1999). Those who associate the Internet with more democracy claim that the Internet enhances democracy because it allows information to become more widely available to citizens who can then be more informed and engaged. However, the design and implementation of those technologies are highly dependent on political willingness. If political actors are not in favour of their usage, then they have no use. Moreover, research on political participation suggests that non-participation may not always stem from a lack of information or participation channels. Therefore, the creation of easier channels for participation and the wider availability of information made possible by the Internet do not guarantee increased participation. There is clearly a need to link recent debates on the new technology with more established knowledge on participation.

The first part of the chapter provides a definition of the Internet and makes a distinction between two aspects of the Internet (as an information source and as a communication medium) in order to explain how it could be used to enhance participation. This part also discusses the social, political and legal limitations that prevent full utilisation of the Internet for political participation. The second part provides a conceptualisation of electronic democracy although the main interest of the research is electronic participation. The purpose is to analyse the limitations of the potential of the Internet to enhance democracy especially in relation to issues of 'digital divide' and equality. This provides a less optimistic and more balanced view about the potential role of the Internet. Finally, the third part provides information about the trend for using the Internet for participation and electronic service delivery purposes in the UK. Within this

policy context, the chapter identifies some themes that will help in analysing the use of the Internet in British local government.

THE INTERNET: PROMISES AND LIMITATIONS

Defining the Internet

Defining and delimiting the Internet is difficult. Technically, the Internet can be defined as the full set of protocols through which computers communicate with each other together with the hardware links. However, technical definitions are not very meaningful here, since this research is concerned with the social and political aspects of the Internet. Unfortunately, any definition that goes beyond a technical definition is problematic. This is so for three reasons. First, the Internet is a very broad concept with technical and social dimensions as well as several applications such as the Web and the email. Second, the Internet has a socially constructed aspect: it is interpreted differently by different actors. It may be perceived as an online library by an academic, as a shopping centre by a disabled person, as a job by a network engineer, or as an online exhibition centre by an artist. Therefore, it has a great potential for 'interpretative flexibility' (Pinch and Bijker, 1984). Moreover, millions of actors *physically* contribute to its construction and content by establishing websites, joining in online discussions and exchanging emails. Therefore, rather than understanding it as a given technology, it is more useful to perceive the Internet as a social artefact whose meaning is continuously being constructed by many actors. As Falk (1998) suggests, "it is the resources and experiences that it makes available that give the Internet its distinctive character and attraction and are the foundations of its meaning" (p. 285).

Third, the Internet is part of a rapidly changing technological environment. For example, its capacity and speed has increased substantially with the introduction of broadband. This has enabled the instant transaction of higher volumes of information. The proliferation of the 'broadband' not only increased the capacity for information exchange, but also introduced new meanings attached to the Internet. Following such developments, the idea about what is possible with the Internet has also changed. Therefore, speaking about change involves not only changes in the properties and capacities of the Internet but also changes in peoples' attitudes towards it.

As its use has diffused into many areas of life, the Internet has also started to become part of daily life. Like other technologies, its 'radicalness' started to diminish. Consequently, its impact has become more difficult to observe. This commodification process is accelerated by its rapid convergence with other technologies. As Bimber (2000) notes:

Increasingly, the Web, electronic mail, television, recorded music, cellular phone service, and a variety of other portable electronic technologies, from personal organisers to automobile navigation systems, will merge. As this technological evolution occurs, what is the Internet and what is not will become even more intricate and in some cases unimportant (p. 330).

This convergence process makes it difficult to research the Internet as a separate construct. For this reason, this research focuses on the Internet without ignoring related Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) especially when they are applied together with the Internet. These ICTs can be defined as various tools and infrastructures that are used to collect, store, deal, spread, and transmit the information such as call centres, Intranet, and various file management systems.

In terms of applications of the Internet, the research focuses on the use of email and websites. "Email involves passing a message automatically from one computer user to another through networks and/or via modems over common carrier (i.e. telephone) lines" (Groper, 1996, p. 157). The Web is a dynamically developing network of vast amount of pages that combine text, graphics, sounds and pictures. Falk (1998) suggests that the Web is an information terrain mapped by a multidimensional set of categories and themes. The basic tool that enabled the socialization of the Internet, and thus the possibility of its democratic use, is the Web, which generated an unprecedented expansion in its use. The rapid development of the Web cannot be explained simply by its technical features. As Falk (1998) notes, "the Web is embedded in both a technological Web (the protocols, data lines, modems, computer hubs, and computer terminals that constitute the Internet) and a Web of social connections that construct and shape its meaning, use and hence its usefulness" (p. 286). These social connections are different for every individual. People construct their own connections through favourite

links, hot lists and customised websites. This makes it extremely difficult to formulate a definition of the Web or the Internet that is valid for everyone.

Promises of the Internet: Focusing on Participation

Various suggestions have been made concerning the possible contribution of the Internet to democracy. Stromer Galley (2000) examines the ways in which the Internet affects campaign organisation in favour of smaller and poorer political parties. Ferdinand (2000) discusses the ways it can contribute to the internationalisation of democracy through the dissemination of ideas. Percy Smith (1995) notes that it can offer significant opportunities for the enhancement of civil liberties such as freedom of association, that minority groups can easily be mobilised in defence of their interests even if they are spatially dispersed. Strassman (1999) argues that it may eventually lead to the demise of the two-party system, as it will lead to the proliferation of many new political parties.

Before discussing the promise of the Internet for the enhancement of democracy, it is essential first to identify the key defining features of the Internet and to explore the new democratic possibilities those features create. Although not exclusive, it is possible to identify six specific characteristics of the Internet, which render it of particular value to participation and democracy. Percy Smith (1995) identifies those characteristics as the ability to transfer high volumes of information at considerable speed, user control, narrow casting, decentralised nature, and interactivity. To this list, Weare (2002) adds the Internet's 'inherently multidimensional' nature in the sense that users are connected to each other without any kind of hierarchical order.

Each of these features can potentially contribute to a more democratic society. For example, the decentralised nature of the Internet allows for a more pluralist environment than the previous technologies such as television and radio could achieve. Its interactive nature allows contribution from the user instead of broadcasting data from one centre to many users. Since the research focuses specifically on participation as a principle of democracy, some of the possibilities created by the Internet and mentioned above, such

as its potential contribution to a more pluralist society or its enhancement of various freedoms, are not of primary interest. Rather, it is concerned with those properties that can be exploited to enhance participation. The research follows Beetham's (1996) dual principles of democracy (popular control and political equality) and analyses how the Internet might be used to enhance citizen participation and how certain limitations might prevent the full exploitation of its potential. The research is also concerned with analysing whether the use of the Internet for enhancing participation contributes to or challenges the political equality principle.

There is a tendency to relate the Internet automatically with increased participation. Those who associate the Internet with more democracy claim that the Internet enhances democracy because it allows information to become more widely available to citizens who can be more informed and engaged (Browning, 1996; Rheingold, 1991). However, the linkages between more information and more participation are not self-evident. Moreover, issues such as differences in the interpretation of information and information overload have not been paid sufficient consideration (some exceptions are Bellamy 2003; Chadwick and May, 2001). There is a need to explore why the Internet is suggested as a technology that could potentially increase citizen participation. For this purpose, it is useful to distinguish between two aspects of the Internet, which are:

- Internet as an information source
- Internet as a communication medium

This is not to claim that the two are mutually exclusive. People exchange information when they communicate. Likewise, when they communicate, they also exchange information. However, the distinction is useful for analytical purposes. The implications of these two aspects for participation are analysed in turn.

Internet as an information source

This part examines the suggestion that the Internet may potentially contribute to more participation because it enables access to a high volume of information more easily and leads to an informed society. The claim is that this in turn may lead to more

participation (Browning, 1996; Rheingold, 1991). This suggestion is problematic on at least five grounds. First, the information available on the Internet must be processed by the user in order to have a meaning. Without such processing information is no more than raw data. As Noveck (2000) suggests, “it is not information *per se* which is useful to the democrat but knowledge, information which has been distilled and contextualised so that it can impart meaning” (p. 23)

People have a capacity to interpret only a certain amount of information. Improvements in the media do not alter human limits. In fact there are suggestions that an excess of information may hamper people’s ability to make judgements (Vickers, 1965). Percy Smith (1995) also suggests that the availability of information is not enough and may in fact be deleterious to democracy if people are unable to make effective use of the information available. In such situations, individuals may become overwhelmed by the volume of information and become dependent on others to evaluate the available information. Moreover, information is not a neutral commodity. It is value-laden which may lead to various interpretations.

Second, as Bonfadelli (2002) suggests, although the information about a certain topic is increasing, this is in most cases a quantitative increase. So, while it is true that the Internet brings about an increase in the amount and sources of information available, the range and diversity of arguments or the *depth* of thematic aspects remains limited as a result of media gate-keeping processes. Despite the claims that there is no owner and that there are no gatekeepers on the Internet (Becker and Slaton, 2000), this is hard to believe. Media conglomerates such as Time Warner and AOL have been quick to shift their power into the Internet arena by merging. Search engines also operate systematically to favour some websites (hence information sources) against others. The availability of more public information is also limited by the degree of willingness of political actors to disclose more information.

The third limitation of the Internet in contributing to a more informed society derives from its unequal distribution. The Internet is more likely to advantage those who are already advantaged in terms of income, skills and access to political links, all of which

are important predictors of participation. Looking at the regular users of the Internet demonstrates that the majority of users are male⁴, relatively young, well educated, with a medium to high income (National Statistics, 2003). There are also inequalities related to urban - rural distinctions further exacerbated by the profit-oriented strategies of information technology companies. Since the provision of Internet access is largely dependent on market forces, infrastructure is highly biased in favour of developed areas (OECD, 2001). In short, lack of physical access to the Internet is an important barrier to a more informed society. Connectedly, another important issue here concerns the purposes of those users accessing the Internet. There are various statistics offering information about the percentages of people who have access to the Internet (Foley, 2000; National Statistics, 2003). However, statistics on what people actually do when they are online shows the results under only very general categories such as 'using email' or 'using chat rooms' (see for example, National Statistics, 2003). Hence, we do not know whether people use the email for political or private reasons.

Fourth, the Internet offers more information but this is done in a much more fragmented way than the traditional media. The Internet offers different sources of information due to its pluralist structure. It is possible to find information even on the most trivial issues. However, the availability of narrow casting for different tastes, issues and groups may lead to people 'knowing more about less' (Percy Smith, 1995: 22). The selective consumption of information may lead to the reinforcement of one's own view, the polarisation of different groups and a lack of shared knowledge within the community. Bonfadelli (2002) claims, "in comparison to the traditional media, the Internet fosters audience fragmentation and individualised information seeking; and this could result in an increasing disintegration of individual agendas and the amount of shared knowledge" (p. 73). The Internet could enable people to bypass both national and local sources of information. However, there is also a countervailing force. Many people pursue their habits on the Internet. For example, a reader of a certain newspaper tends to follow the website of that particular newspaper rather than seeking alternative sources of information. As Norris (1999) concludes "the Web seems to have been used more often as a means to access traditional news rather than as a radical new source of unmediated

⁴ Although, more recent research shows that the gender gap has been closing.

information and communication between citizens and their elected leaders” (p. 89). This again limits the potential of the Internet for offering alternative sources of information.

Research on the impact of television suggests that it has a negative impact on levels of social capital and associational activity (Putnam, 1995; Gans, 1993). However, later research shows that what matters is what you do with the television rather than the time spent watching it (Norris, 1996). Research on the Internet reveals similar conclusions. The Internet can be used for extremely diverging purposes and activities ranging from shopping, playing games, communicating with friends and family to joining a discussion forum or online political campaigning. However, the distribution of these choices is not random. Better-educated people are better able to use and interpret specific media information. They also possess more general knowledge on a broader range of public affairs topics that enhances their recognition and acquisition of new information. Shah et al (2001) suggest that the higher the educational background, the more people use the Internet in an instrumental way, and the lower the educational background, the more people seem to use the Internet only for entertainment purposes. Evidence shows that the people who make extensive use of online political information tend to be the same people who are already strongly interested in politics (Bimber, 1999; Norris, 1999).

The Internet increases information availability, but this does not alter the cognitive capacity to process information. As Bimber (1998) suggests, “it is not simply the availability of information that structures engagement; it is human interest and capacity to understand many complex issues” (1998: 7). ‘Attention’ is one of the most valuable resources in the new era and the availability of information may not always invoke attention (Shultz, 2000). Moreover, the motivation to obtain information and to seek different perspectives is necessary in order to benefit from the Internet as an information source. In fact, even before the use of the Internet there was an abundance of information available through other technologies such as the television, radio and the print media. The important question is whether there is any theoretical and empirical base for claiming that there is a positive association between level of information and participation. People who are more informed about what is going on in politics may

potentially participate more because they can see the implications for their lives. However, it is also possible to argue that those who are more informed about politics could be more frustrated which may lead to their abstention from participation (Warren, 2002). The relation between information and participation is an important area of investigation.

Internet as a communication medium

The Internet offers convenient, cheap and innovative methods of communication, which are attractive especially for certain segments of society such as the young and those who are house-bound due to disability, illness, age or lack of social skills. It is argued that the expanded communication capacity of the Internet can lead to more political learning and more frequent acts of participation (Browning, 1996; Rheingold, 1991). It is also argued that the Internet may open new channels of communication such as email, which may again lead to more participation (Groper, 1996). The Internet enables communication in the absence of close proximity, either spatially or temporally. For example, there has been a flourishing of online communities which are not territorially bound, but which communicate with each other on several issues. Some of these online communities are politically motivated and dedicated to online participation. This section questions whether the Internet improves and *qualitatively* changes existing communication systems or whether it creates only a *quantitative* increase stemming from the ease and relative cheapness of communicating via the Internet. Whether the relative cheapness of the Internet is relevant for all segments of the society will be discussed under 'digital divide'.

In order to understand the potential of the Internet in increasing the communication capacity, it is vital to investigate different varieties of communication. Political scientists usually ignore this multi-faceted nature of communication. This is a fundamental problem since the use of the Internet does not support all communication types equally. Understanding the kinds of communication supported by the Internet will provide insights concerning the modes of political participation that can potentially be enhanced by it. At this point, it is useful to consider Weare's (2002) typology of communication.

Weare introduces four different forms of communication and discusses how the Internet could affect each of them. It is important to understand these different forms of communication because each of them supports a different model of democracy and a different understanding of political participation. The most important aspect of the Internet as a communication medium is the fact that it is 'inherently multidimensional' (Weare, 2002) unlike the previous mediums. For example, telephone enables a 'one to one' conversation while television and printed media allows 'one to many' broadcasting. The Internet can support these forms as well, but its main difference consists in its ability to support another dimension, which is 'many to many' communication. Based on Weare's (2002) typology of communication, the following illustrates how the Internet supports four different forms of communication.

Conversation: This is *one to one* dialogue such as face-to-face encounter or telephone conversation. The Internet technology enables people to communicate via email rapidly and at their choice of time. The advantage of email is that unlike telephone there is no need to have a counterpart on the other side of the communication. Email may be sent whenever desired and there are no restrictions about office hours. In the local government context, citizens can use email, at their choice of time, to contact their representatives or officers.

Information aggregation: This is collection, analysis and transmission of information from *many people to a single agency*. The best examples here would be elections, surveys, and petitions. The Internet can contribute to this aspect of communication because they may be applied more rapidly, frequently and cheaply. In the local government context, this feature may be used to hold frequent referendums, online polls and mass emailing of elected representatives.

Broadcast: This is mostly associated with mass media *from one centre to many* such as newspapers, radio and television. The main contribution of the Internet in this form of communication is its interactivity, which fundamentally affects the role of the user. The user is no longer a passive consumer of the information or the receiving side of the communication. The distinctiveness of the Internet is that its decentralised nature means

that users can also become broadcasters, for example, by establishing their own websites. In the local government context, council meetings can be broadcast live on the Web.

Group dialogue: This means interaction among a large number of senders and receivers. It is the most difficult form of communication because it requires sustaining large numbers of links and high levels of co-ordination. Seminars, conference telephone calls and newspaper discussion groups could be examples. Weare (2002) argues that this is the only form of communication that the Internet can promise to transform radically. Online discussion groups and chat rooms are the best examples of this contribution. Its distinctiveness is that there is communication between many actors instead of a centre determining the subject matter, time and speed of information and communication (Dijk, 2000a). In the local government context, group dialogue can be facilitated by initiating online discussion forums on the local authorities' websites.

The purpose of making a distinction between different forms of communication is to analyse how these different forms are supported by the use of the Internet in varying degrees. Weare's (2002) distinction demonstrates that the Internet does not affect all forms of communication equally. It seems that the contribution of the Internet to the first two forms is more likely to be quantitative than qualitative. The contribution is not in the nature of the communication but in its convenience of use. Weare (2002) argues that we should be more interested in the last form of communication (group dialogue) because it is here that the technology offers the most. However, this would be a technology-led choice. The problem of declining interest in politics and weakening ties between government and citizens motivate studies researching the potential contribution of the Internet to the solution of these problems. Therefore, there is a case for focusing on 'government to citizen' and 'citizen to government' relations. There is a body of research concerned with exploring the horizontal communication opportunities between citizens offered by the Internet (Coleman, 1999; Wilhelm, 1999; Dahlberg, 2001). However, this research follows another strand of research, which focuses on vertical communication between the government and the citizens (Hague and Loader, 1999; Needham, 2001). This is in line with the general focus of the research, which is

concerned with representative democracy and not with the development of an alternative model of strong democracy based on increased deliberation between citizens.

Although the Internet is suggested as a medium to enhance interactivity and conversation, there are suggestions that it diminishes the value of dialogue. Putnam (2000), for example, suggests that, although the Internet can be a valuable supplement to traditional forms of communication, virtual or mediated forms of political and social communications are an inadequate substitute for traditional face-to-face social networks in local communities, since virtual contact precludes the type of face-to-face signals that build social trust. The promise of the Internet as a new mode of communication is also limited by social inequalities, which will be discussed in relation to 'digital divide'. Moreover, there is no theoretical or empirical evidence that increased communication capacities would automatically lead to more participation.

Moreover, none of the above possibilities invalidates the normative arguments against participation. The problem of participation is not only the arithmetic impossibility or the inconvenience of participation due to time constraints, which can easily be solved with the use of the Internet. Electronic participation may be a remedy for the arithmetic problem of participation by acting against the constraints of time and space. For example, people may vote on various referendums without having to leave their home. Likewise, they may be consulted on various policy issues without having to come together. Costs of consulting the public would also be much lower after the initial investment. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, there are normative arguments against participation, which are still valid. For example, the expectation that frequent consultations may undermine the role of the representatives and may create tensions in the working of the representative democracy is a barrier for the full utilisation of the Internet for participation. Moreover, frequent consultations may create high and unrealistic expectations on the participants, which may again be harmful for the working of the democratic system. In short, suggesting that the use of the Internet will automatically lead to higher participation undermines the normative arguments against participation, which may cause policy actors to abstain from using the Internet for participation purposes.

This is not to dismiss the potential of the Internet. Evaluating the potential of the Internet in relation to different modes of participation may provide a better understanding of its potential. The Internet may be more useful in the facilitation of some modes than it is of others. For example, Dijk (2000a) demonstrates that one-sided participation modes, such as writing to officials (contacting) or signing petitions, are more likely to be taken up online by the public compared to participation modes that take advantage of face-to-face communication, such as attending a meeting. Since this research is primarily interested in vertical communication between local authorities and the public, the potential of the Internet to enhance this relation may be substantial. In terms of the amount of participation, it seems that the Internet can increase levels of participation by working against practical barriers such as disability or rural location. It provides an opportunity for those who are housebound and who prefer to participate electronically. There are also suggestions that the innovative methods of participating may encourage more young people to participate (Coleman and Hall, 2001).

So far, the potential of the Internet for participation has been analysed without any reference to the implications for democracy. The next section analyses the relation between electronic participation and electronic democracy.

ELECTRONIC PARTICIPATION AND ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

There is a tendency in the academic literature to overemphasise the potential for increasing participation without any reference to the broader implications for democracy. Many studies claim that the Internet will make communication much easier and will allow people to vote in electronic referendums to reach political decisions (Becker, 1993). This will enable a return to an Athenian style of democracy where people participate directly in decision-making. These studies usually perceive representative democracy as a proximate to democracy. For example, Grossman (1995) distrusts the institutions of representative democracy and claims that now that the technology is available, there is no need for any intermediaries. This is deterministic in the sense that it assumes that the existence of necessary technology will bring about a

more direct model of democracy. These claims rely heavily on the value of direct participation and ignore other principles of democracy, especially political equality.

Although this research is about electronic participation, it is difficult to isolate this aspect from the general debate on electronic democracy. This is related to the intrinsic, but complicated, relationship between participation and democracy which was discussed in the previous chapter. Therefore, this section engages with analysing electronic democracy although the main interest is in electronic participation rather than in drawing a comprehensive e-democracy model. The previous chapter introduced the dual principles of democracy as popular control and political equality (Beetham, 1996). The question here is how the Internet can be used in a way that is supportive of both these principles at the same time. First, a conceptualisation of electronic democracy is provided in order to analyse the role of participation within different models of electronic democracy. Second, the implications of the digital divide for political equality are analysed.

Before proceeding to discuss e-democracy, it is important to explain why the term 'e-democracy' is used rather than comparable terms such as 'teledemocracy' and 'digital democracy'. Teledemocracy is mostly associated with some kind of direct democracy, which has been advocated since the 1970s by futurists (Toffler, 1970) as well as critics of representative democracy (Grossman, 1995). In fact, it was used before the proliferation of the Internet as a reference to initial experiments of voting by telephone (Arterton, 1987). Digital democracy (Hague and Loader, 1998; Alexander and Pal, 1998) is the most suitable term for the purposes of this research because it is clearly related to digital technologies, unlike 'electronic democracy', which may also include old media such as telephone and broadcasting. However, it is also important to acknowledge that there is no sudden break from old technologies and that organisations, including local authorities, try to combine old and new technologies in order to offer alternative channels of participation. The telephone, for example, is still very important. Moreover, 'electronic democracy' is more widely used by both the central government and academics in the UK (Chadwick, 2003; Bellamy, 2000; Horrocks and Webb, 1994; Horrocks and Pratchett, 1995; Cabinet Office, 2001). Therefore, although the main

interest is in digital technologies, and mainly the Internet, the term electronic democracy (e-democracy) is used throughout the thesis. This is so as not to ignore the fact that there is no sharp shift to digital technologies and to reflect the fact that e-democracy is more widely used than any other similar terms.

Conceptualising electronic democracy

It is possible to claim that there is not much theorising about the implications of the Internet for democracy. The question is: is it possible to develop overarching theories considering the fact that technological possibilities and applications change so rapidly and continuously? Snellen and Van de Donk (1998) suggest that “the faster the developments in a field of study are, the more difficult it is to let the theories related to that field of study, mature. In such circumstances, most statements will remain provisional and context dependent” (p. 4).

Another important question relates to whether or not we really need a separate theory for electronic democracy if it involves the same principles. As Hague and Loader (1999) ask, “is there something qualitatively different about digital democracy that gives it a new conceptual status?” (p. 6). In fact, as Horrocks and Webb (1994) suggest, the term ‘electronic democracy’ is to some extent a misnomer. Democracy is not replaced by something new. Instead, there is *electronically aided democracy* suggesting that it is still the same principles and conditions, but that these can be potentially enhanced using the technology. Nevertheless, there is no self-evident linkage between the Internet and democracy. Therefore, this is an area where there should be more theoretical and empirical investigation.

It is a difficult theoretical task to draw a definition of e-democracy. The debates about the role of the Internet (and previous technologies) for democratic renewal are grounded in different notions of democracy. Hence, many studies have adopted a framework that enables them to evaluate the potential contribution of the Internet and other ICTs to different models of democracy (Arterton, 1987; Laudon, 1977; Barber, 1984). The

existence of various models of e-democracy arises from two main sources. Firstly, there is no single theory of democracy.

As discussed in the previous chapter, democracy can be conceptualised based on different sets of principles and as Saward (2003) argues, all principles are open to challenge. For example, in his book Models of Democracy, Held (1996), offers various models such as direct, plural and liberal democracy. ICTs and particularly the Internet introduce multiple features that may potentially enhance different aspects or models of democracy. So, for example, direct democracy models may be based on its interactive nature while 'strong' democracy (Barber, 1984) models start from the possibility that the Internet may enable group discussions and enhance virtual public spheres. Second, there are different approaches towards the reasons behind the current problems of democracy. Although there is a common understanding that there is a problem of citizen interest and participation, different explanations are provided. Each explanation leads to a different conceptualisation of e-democracy.

Despite the existence of various models, there are common themes, such as information, more communication between government and citizens and more citizen participation. For example, Hacker and Dijk (2000) define e-democracy as:

The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and computer mediated communication (CMC) in all kinds of media (e.g. the Internet, interactive broadcasting and digital telephony) for purposes of enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication (emphasis added, p. 1).

Hague and Loader (1999) suggest that the ICTs could potentially promote government accountability, create a more informed citizenry and facilitate public deliberation and participation in the decision-making processes. They explain their idea of e-democracy as:

'Strong democracy' requires strong and interactive links between the state and civil society; between government and the governed ... we have the prospect of national and local governments interacting with citizens via web sites, e-mail addresses and public information kiosks. We also have experiments with electronic voting, electronic voter guides, citizen juries and the like (p.13, emphases added).

This study does not attempt to draw a comprehensive map of existing or possible models of e-democracy. It is rather concerned with one aspect of democracy, which is citizen participation. However, as explained in the previous chapter, developing such models help in identifying contemporary trends moving in novel directions. To take an example, analysing the developments associated with technology under four different models of democracy, Horrocks et al (2000) identify strong elements of a 'managed' democracy in which democratic participation is controlled from the top or limited to expressions channelled through the consumption nexus. Despite acknowledging the potential for the development of different models, the research focuses on the use of the Internet within representative democracy.

This decision is related to the nature of the research questions, the policy context in the UK and the general theoretical approach of the study. To put it more clearly:

- The main research question is related to the 'use' of the Internet by elected local authorities to enhance citizen participation. Since the research is analysing *their* strategies on e-democracy, it would not be reasonable to expect them to introduce anything that will change the entire operation of local government, although at a conceptual level it is possible to suggest different radical models.
- The general policy context in the UK is also in favour of supporting and supplementing the institutions of representative democracy by using the Internet, rather than radically changing it.
- Although there are different models of democracy, the research follows Norris's (2000) point that "the extensive debate on direct and strong democracy models deflects the attention from the potential function of the Internet to strengthen the institutions of representative democracy" (p. 5).
- In terms of the theoretical approach taken, this research considers the importance of the role of formal and informal rules in mediating forces of change. I take seriously Hagen's (2000) point that "projects which have aimed to support traditional, well established structures and processes of democratic systems have been more successful than those which have tried to employ new transformative democratic ways and means" (p. 56)

Focusing on representative democracy does not mean that the research is only interested in electronically assisted elections. Many proposals about the use of the Internet focus on the voting process (Becker and Slaton, 2000; Coleman, 2001; Norris 2003). This is natural considering that voting is a central ritual of democracy as well as a process of information capture and aggregation. However, as explained in the previous chapter, representation cannot be ensured through voting alone. It must also be supported by non-electoral methods of participation. Although the issue of electronic voting constitutes an important body of research, this study goes beyond that and focuses on additional modes of electronic participation.

However, even within a representative model, there might be variations in terms of the types, influence or depth of citizen participation. Some representative systems may welcome it more than others. It is also true that within the representative democracy model, there may be some developments towards direct or deliberative models of democracy. Although the research is conducted within the parameters of representative democracy, it is also intended to identify such developments.

Digital divide and the principle of political equality

One of the most debated issues of e-democracy and the information society in general is the divide between the so-called information 'haves' and 'have-nots'. The previous chapter discussed the relationship between participation and democracy and argued that this relation is not straightforward largely because of the paradox of participation and equality. This concern is exacerbated by the fact that the Internet is more likely to advantage those who are already advantaged in terms of income, skills and access to political links, all of which are important predictors of participation.

Although the distinction between information haves and have-nots is useful in highlighting the knowledge, skills and access gaps in the society, the distinction is strikingly simplistic. As Dijk (2000b) argues, a dichotomy of homogenous groups of information rich and poor, with a wide gap between, is a false image of a two-tiered society (p. 166). Contemporary societies are characterised by much more complex

differentiation in resources and skills. In order to reflect these complexities, inequalities can be analysed in relation to three categories: physical, psychological and structural barriers.

Physical: Looking at the regular users of the Internet demonstrates that the majority of users are male, relatively young, well educated, with a medium to high income (National Statistics, 2003). There are also inequalities related to urban-rural distinctions intensified by the profit-oriented strategies of information technology companies. Since the provision of Internet access is largely dependent on market forces, the infrastructure is highly biased in favour of developed areas because technology companies are reluctant to invest in deprived areas due to insufficient returns (OECD, 2001). However, there are also indicators showing that these inequalities may be declining. The gender gap has been closing (National Statistics Omnibus Survey, 2003; OECD, 2001), the cost of PC ownership and Internet access has been declining (OECD, 2001), and computer courses have been becoming compulsory parts of education. The generation gap is also expected to narrow with the demise of the older generations. However, the lack of physical access to the Internet is still an important barrier. Evidence shows that among people who have not used the Internet before, 43 per cent identified lack of access as a reason (National Statistics, 2003). Inequalities in physical access constitute an important policy issue for governments. Governments develop strategies to provide access to those who cannot afford it. This is partly achieved by providing public access points in libraries, schools and community centres. However, providing physical access is not sufficient because using the technology requires a certain level of familiarity and skill. This brings us to the second barrier.

Psychological: Although Internet and PC use seems to be easy for those who can, it may actually be very difficult for those who have not tried it before. Especially for illiterate and elderly people, there is a psychological barrier to be overcome. When the hardware is difficult to manage and the software and content is not user-friendly, alienated users may develop feelings of low self-esteem and lack of confidence. Evidence shows that among people who have not used the Internet before, 26 per cent stated, 'lack of confidence/skills' as a cause. This may well be reflective of a personal

choice not to use the Internet, but it becomes an important policy issue if it stems from psychological barriers. Nevertheless, as computers become indispensable to living and working in contemporary societies and technological hardware and software become more user-friendly and simple, psychological barriers are likely to decline in importance.

A third category of barriers is identified by Dijk (2000b) as '*usage gaps*' which are concerned with inequalities in the way the Internet is used by different people. The first indication of a usage gap is the fact that increased Internet access does not result in increased use. Further analysis shows that well-educated people make far more use of the several applications of the Internet. The usage gap is further widened by the continually diverging areas of applications of the Internet and other ICTs. These technologies can be used for extremely divergent purposes and activities ranging from shopping, playing games, communicating with friends and family to joining a discussion forum and online political campaigning. However, the distribution of these choices is not random. Better-educated people are better able to use and interpret specific media information. They also possess more general knowledge on a broader range of public affairs topics, and that enhances their recognition and acquisition of new information. As Bonfadelli (2002) suggests, "media campaigns generally reach precisely those least in need of it, namely the already motivated and informed segments" (p. 67). Empirical evidence shows that there is such a trend. Davis and Owen (1998) conclude that the Internet provides new sources of information for the politically interested, but that there are good grounds to be sceptical about its transformative potential for democratic participation (in Norris, 2000). In short, although the Internet appears to be an egalitarian medium, it is likely that it will amplify the voice of those with the interest, skills and knowledge to make use of new forms of communication and further marginalise those who are excluded from public affairs.

There is a need for a deeper understanding of the digital divide that would go beyond simple access issues and enable us to understand the significance of structural barriers. This has important policy implications too. Governments should think beyond supplying public access points and focus on social structural barriers as well. Any

discussion about digital divide has to consider that the gap in knowledge, resources and skills is not a new phenomenon introduced by the Internet. Such inequalities have existed throughout history. What distinguishes the contemporary debate is that the gap seems to be permanent and widening. The issue of digital divide involves different aspects of equality, some of which may decline in importance as evidenced by the closing gender gap. Deliberate government policies also help in closing the gap as will be discussed in the last part of the chapter. However, some aspects of the inequalities are structural and likely to remain. This has significant policy implications for realising electronic democracy, which is precisely about the promotion of a more informed and engaged society.

Electronic participation at the local level

This section explains why this research is concerned with e-democracy at the local level. The Internet is a perfect medium to eliminate (or at least to diminish) the constraints of distance and time. Hence, it could be suggested that its impact would be greatest at the national and global levels where these constraints are more important than at the local level. For example, evidence shows that citizens use email to contact their representatives more at the national than at the local level (Bimber, 1999). One might even claim that there is no use for e-democracy at the local level. In fact, however, there is both a theoretical and a practical case for e-democracy at the local level.

It is possible to suggest that there is a tension between the properties of the Internet and the concept of 'local' which presents something of a paradox. Given the properties of the Internet, especially its ability to connect people from anywhere *regardless of distance*, what is the point in talking about the local in general or local government and local participation in particular? There is a tension here, but the question as posed is technology-led and thus inappropriate in this context. A better question to ask would be that of how, given the role of the local public sphere and local government in people's lives, the Internet can be used to support them. This approach eliminates the paradox to some extent. However, there are still challenges to the notion of the local such as the

emergence of non-local information sources and non-local participation opportunities in addition to the emergence of online/virtual communities. The important question in the context of this research is as follows: do these developments mean that people are less tied to their immediate localities and consequently less likely to participate in local issues? Another important question concerns why it is that elected local authorities would use the Internet when they already have the advantage of being close to the local people (at least compared to national government).

On the first question, it is important to evaluate the extent to which virtual communities constitute an alternative to local communities and identities. Analysing the robustness of online communities, Falk (1998) concludes that ease of communication on the Web does not ensure unity of purpose among the members of these communities. He suggests that robust online communities usually 'stretch out from local communities' rather than emerging from nowhere. Similarly, looking into the social movements on the Web, Calhoun (1998) contends that the Internet is a very useful tool, but that the strength of these movements still lies largely in their 'local roots' (p. 382). Likewise, Bimber (1998) notes that the Internet may be influential in the creation of issue or interest based groups but that he is not convinced about the creation of 'thick' online communities "in which a common good beyond the sum of individuals' private interests is pursued and in which individuals define their own interests and values in reference to collective goods" (p. 145). Arguably, what makes a local community distinctive is that it allows different sorts of people to meet each other in dense networks that cut across issues or individual interests.

This is not to suggest a romanticised view of local communities living in harmony. Modern societies are characterised by a diversity of identities and interests. People are members of local communities, but, at the same time, they are individuals with certain rights who may have different and even conflicting interests. Elected local authorities are organised so as to address these rights. At this point, it is useful to refer to Lowndes (1995) who suggests that local government is important in relation to both the practical and the 'moral' aspects of citizenship. The moral aspect concerns the role of local government in engendering and reflecting feelings of community. The practical aspect

suggests that it is also the level of governance at which many practical services are provided. If many important services are provided at this level, local government needs to know about what the people, as individuals or as a community (or as different communities), want. This requires alternative ways of consulting people, which brings us to the second question: why should local authorities use online methods to do this?

There are at least four considerations that motivate elected local authorities to use online participation. First, even on the scale of local government, there may be physical difficulties in connecting with people (e.g. rurality, weather, disability). Second, electronic participation can be seen as a panacea for low levels of participation. Local authorities may believe that more people would participate if easier and more innovative options are provided. Third, electronic participation may be seen as a way of reducing the cost of consulting and as offering a more modern way of consulting. Fourth, local authorities may seek to engage with specific 'hard to reach groups' especially the young and those with limited social skills. There is also a practical case for e-democracy at the local level. Although the Internet promises an interactive relation between the government and the citizens this is more difficult to realise at the national level simply because of its size. MPs have already started to complain about the number of emails that they receive everyday. A report by the House of Commons Information Select Committee notes 'the ease with which constituents and others can send emails is seen by MPs as both an opportunity and a threat. It can generate a demand that the MPs cannot meet'⁵ (House of Commons website).

In short, there is a case for electronic participation at the local level because many studies show that the most successful experiments in e-democracy are those that have physical and local roots. As Hacker and Dijk (2000) suggest, the local level offers the best chance for an interplay between online and offline political activities (p. 218). Besides, local government is the level of government that provides many relevant services for people. This entails more frequent consultation, which can be supported by

⁵ House of Commons Website,

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmselect/cminform/1065/106505.htm#note19>

the use of the Internet. This research is concerned with the following ways in which the Internet could be used to enhance citizen participation at the local level:

- Supporting the relationship between elected members and citizens
- Consulting the people through online modes
- Supporting existing modes of consultation/participation
- Informing citizens about council services, priorities, strategies
- Enabling electronic voting

Although the research focuses on electronic participation, this part of the chapter has considered the broader implications of electronic participation for democracy, especially in relation to digital divide and equality. The potential for developments towards different models of democracy has also been mentioned despite focusing on developments within representative democracy. This part has also argued that there is a case for using the Internet at the local level, although the constraints of time and space are less valid compared to national level. In fact, e-democracy at the local level has been a significant part of the policy agenda in the UK, and this is discussed next.

THE TREND FOR USING THE INTERNET FOR PARTICIPATION PURPOSES

The policy context

As discussed in the last part of the previous chapter, policy developments concerning political participation need to be evaluated as part of a modernisation agenda. This agenda is characterised by a dual emphasis on democratic renewal and providing better quality public services. This dual emphasis is relevant for the use of the Internet too. There is a clear political commitment to the use of the Internet both for providing public services online and encouraging people to participate in the democratic process. Hence, the developments regarding the use of the Internet by local authorities should be evaluated within the broad context of the democratic renewal programme and the political commitment of the central government to 'get the UK online'. It is possible to analyse the policy context in relation to developments towards e-government and e-

democracy⁶. This is not to claim that these two concepts are totally different. However, as will be discussed in the next chapter, they have different purposes and they promise different things.

Concerning developments towards *e-government*, in order to implement electronic service delivery across all public services, the Government made explicit commitments by setting a target of 100 % availability of services electronically by 2005. The office of the E-envoy was set up in late 1998 in order to monitor the developments in this field as well as ensuring universal access to the Internet. This was followed by the launch of the UK Online portal in September 2000. The portal has been designed to give people online access to public information and services. It is planned to be an easy entry point for people who want to search government information, find out about local services, and obtain certain services such as applying for a passport. The site also aims to standardise online consultative processes for different government departments.

In 2001, DTLR announced details of the Local Government Online (LGOL) initiative. The announcement required all English authorities to submit an Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) statement to DTLR. IEG statements are corporate plans which set out how local councils are planning and implementing electronic service delivery. The purpose has been to engage councils in promoting a corporate approach to implementing e-government. At the national level, the IEG process also provides a source of information from which the government can identify progress in implementing electronic local government. The first round of IEG statements in 2001 required councils to set out their plans for implementing e-government. The second round in 2002 emphasised the need for councils to provide evidence of progress in taking the e-government agenda forward and to demonstrate realistic plans of action and expenditure to meet 2005 targets.

DTLR also invited councils wishing to be a pathfinder to express their interest. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) funded 25 Pathfinder projects, with the aim of exploring and developing new ways of implementing e-government. The

⁶ For definitions of e-government and e-democracy as well as their operationalisation for the purposes of this research, see Chapter 4.

pathfinder partnerships involved 110 local authorities and many public and private sector partners. Pathfinders have developed generic solutions for a variety of technical, policy and management issues surrounding the implementation of e-government. The ODPM also required the “appointment of e-champions (member and officer) responsible for meeting the target and ensuring that performance against these targets is subject to effective scrutiny by both citizens and elected members”⁷. In order to measure performance towards e-government targets, a new Best Value performance indicator (BVPI 157) was created.

Concerning developments towards *e-democracy*, there is a willingness to exploit the Internet for democratic purposes besides managerial ones. For example, nine pilot projects of e-voting were initiated for the 2002 local elections following the three experiments held in the local elections 2000. The aim was to make the voting process simpler, accessible and more efficient for the electorate with innovative methods and to open up the possibility of an e-enabled general election after 2006. Independent research was initiated to identify the barriers for implementing e-voting and recommend ways to overcome those barriers (Pratchett et al, 2002).

However, e-democracy is not only about e-voting. The concept of e-democracy is associated with efforts to broaden political participation and to explore inclusive ways of involving citizens in the decision-making processes. The government also encourages the development of innovative non-electoral ways of consulting people through using the Internet. In 2003, the government published ‘In the Service of Democracy’, a wide-ranging public consultation. The aim of the proposed policy was to take advantage of the new technologies’ potential to encourage people to participate in the democratic process. There are three objectives:

- Facilitating participation in the democratic process by making it easier for people to collect public information, follow the political process, discuss and form groups on political issues, scrutinise government and vote in elections.

⁷ ODPM Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) Statement Guidance, 2001

- Broadening participation by opening up a range of new channels for democratic communication
- Deepening participation by creating a closer link between citizens and their representatives

After providing a brief account of the policy developments concerning e-government and e-democracy, it is useful to identify the major themes and tensions that run through these developments. In this way, it is possible to take a step away from merely describing the policy developments and towards identifying major issues relevant for the purposes of the research. There are a number of implicit tensions, which militate against local authorities continuing to experiment with public participation. These are discussed next.

Emerging issues and tensions surrounding the use of the Internet

The issues and tensions surrounding the use of the Internet can be investigated in relation to emphasis on the top-down and bottom-up elements of the agenda, e-government and e-democracy and finally the digital divide.

Top down and bottom up elements

The local e-government strategy builds upon a range of national targets, standards and frameworks to develop a scheme for local government that is both centrally co-ordinated and locally sensitive. On one hand, there are clear and sharp targets that have been set for e-government for which all the local authorities are required to aim. The strategy of the government could be described as a 'carrots and sticks' strategy. The government identifies the standards for e-government and requires local authorities to meet those standards and targets. If they are not met, there are certain sanctions such as further inspections. But the government also provides incentives such as extra funding and exemption from inspections. On the other hand, local authorities have substantial freedom in the implementation of the government policy. Many local authorities have been experimenting with different ways of using the technology. There are local variations in preferred technologies, methods, and intentions.

Although driven particularly by central government funding and target setting, there are significant patterns of diversity and selectivity despite an overarching central strategy for e-government (Pratchett and Leach, 2003, p. 261). A good example of the bottom-up development is that the IEG statements and the progress in the pathfinder projects collectively informed the national strategy for local e-government published jointly by ODPM and LGA. The national strategy aims “to create a common framework within which local strategies can be planned with confidence; describe what needs to be put in place nationally to help this happen”. Hence, there is a sense of implicit diversity within a common framework that emphasises certain core expectations.

Bottom-up approaches have also been encouraged through various initiatives in the form of experimentation in selected local authorities as exemplified in the Pathfinder and National e-democracy projects. Because e-government is such a new area, there is a lot of room for experimentation. Not only in the UK, but also in the rest of the world, various models are developed and different technologies are tried. This contributes to diversity in strategies and implementations within different localities.

In short, on one hand, there is a process of homogenisation among local authorities in terms of their strategy in using the Internet, which is driven by the central government’s targets and incentives. On the other hand, there is a process of variation and diversity in which local authorities develop their own way of using the Internet for electronic service delivery or democratic purposes. Although such diversity can be celebrated in the name of local autonomy, there is a significant implication that citizens in some localities have a wider range of tools to access services and to participate in the political processes than citizens in other localities. This may potentially widen the digital gap between certain locations.

E-government and e-democracy purposes

In order to implement electronic service delivery across all public services, the Government made explicit commitments by setting a target of 100 per cent availability of services electronically by 2005. It is possible to argue that excessive targets on

electronic service delivery distract attention from considerations of e-democracy. This is not to ignore the intrinsic relation between e-government and e-democracy, which is explained by reference to a consumer democracy model in chapters 2 and 4.

Nevertheless, it appears that the use of the Internet is sought to achieve primarily e-government purposes. This is not surprising considering that e-government rests upon more tangible goals such as provision of services online. It is also easier to justify spending on better quality services through the use of the Internet. E-democracy purposes, by contrast, are more abstract and cannot always be defended so easily.

Also, this is not to claim that the government is not concerned with using the technology for democratic purposes. The publishing of 'In the Service of Democracy' (Cabinet Office, 2001) signals a willingness to exploit the Internet for democratic purposes as well as managerial ones. In addition, the launch of e-voting pilot projects and national e-democracy projects signals the existence of such willingness. The e-democracy policy has two dimensions. First, it aims to encourage people to take part in elections by providing choices about how they cast their vote including through the Internet. Second, it aims to encourage people to interact with government between elections including participating in on-line discussion forums. Hence, there is willingness to use the new technologies both to enhance institutions of representative democracy (i.e. online elections) and inject elements of a more participatory order.

Despite the dual emphasis on using the Internet both for providing services online and for contributing to the enhancement of democracy, the potential for using the Internet for democratic purposes appears to be marginalised *vis-à-vis* managerial and service delivery-oriented purposes in the current policy context in the UK. It is very likely that this tendency at the national level is reflected within local authorities as well.

Social exclusion and digital divide

The issue of digital divide is not only about accessing the electronic public services. Those without IT skills and access to the Internet find themselves increasingly excluded from many other services as many businesses such as banks and supermarkets go online. As a result of such developments in both the private and public sector, those

who do not have transport or Internet access are having to rely on poor quality choices. The government acknowledges digital divide as a major issue. The Office of the e-Envoy is leading a cross-government programme aimed at ensuring that everyone who wants it can have Internet access by 2005. In September 2000, the Prime Minister set the target of 6000 UK online centres by the end of 2002. Through the achievement of this target, free or low cost Internet access has been provided and support for first-time users has been offered.

The Government is committed to narrowing the digital gap through a range of initiatives such as the establishment of a Policy Action Team on digital divide. Other activities include initiatives such as UK online centres, Wired up Communities, and Learndirect. Collectively, they all contribute to making ICT locally accessible in disadvantaged communities, which often have low employment, a higher percentage of people with low basic skills and a high level of poverty.

There is a danger that the issue of digital divide may undermine the vision of e-democracy. Although there are suggestions that the Internet can actually militate against social exclusion, especially for people with disabilities or those living in rural areas, this is true only if they can afford to access the Internet in the first place.

CONCLUSIONS

There have been various suggestions about the potential contribution of the Internet in engendering citizen participation claiming that the Internet allows information and communication to become easily and more widely available. In order to explore how the use of the Internet can lead to a more informed and engaged society, two aspects of the Internet (as an information source and as a communication medium) have been analysed. In this way, it is argued that it would be too simplistic to recommend the Internet as a panacea for enhancing participation. The significance of social and political processes in shaping the technology and the *design* of the Internet for participation purposes by policy makers will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Looking from the citizens' perspective, electronic participation may be a remedy for some practical problems of participation such as the constraints of time and space. However, those who are not interested in participating would not suddenly become interested in participating simply because electronic participation is more convenient. At this point, it is useful to restate that *citizens' perspectives* do not constitute the empirical focus of this research. The research explores how the *local authorities'* strategy in relation to the use of the Internet for participation purposes develops and what kinds of constraints there are that limit the full utilisation of the Internet for this purpose.

This chapter has contributed to theorising electronic democracy by analysing the complicated relationship between electronic participation and electronic democracy instead of taking an approach that collapses any distinction between the two concepts. This was achieved in two ways. First, the issue of digital divide has been identified as a central dilemma within the debate on electronic democracy. The Internet may be used for enhancing political participation, but its unequal distribution would mean that electronic participation is not equal to electronic democracy. Hence, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the digital divide that would go beyond simple access issues and enable us to understand the significance of structural barriers that prevent certain groups of people from being informed and engaged. This has significant policy implications for realising electronic democracy which is supposed to be about a more informed and engaged society.

Second, in considering the different democracy models that can be supported by the use of the Internet, the chapter suggested that increased participation through the Internet may contribute not only to democracy but also to the divergence of models of democracy. This is not technological determinism. This research acknowledges the significance of the role of formal and informal rules in mediating forces of technological change and focuses on the use of the Internet within the parameters of representative democracy. However, it also acknowledges that there may be developments towards alternative models of democracy which have to be identified. By analysing the policy context of the developments regarding the use of the Internet, the

chapter also argued that the use of the Internet is mostly seen as a tool in a modernisation process which emphasises values such as efficiency and high quality services over and above values such as participation and equality.

So far, the thesis has been concerned mainly with introducing the two objects of analysis: local participation and the Internet. The next chapter provides a critique of the existing literature and begins to develop a research framework.

CHAPTER 4

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH AGENDA AND FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a critique of the literature regarding electronic participation and democracy. Combined with the dilemmas and the gaps that have been identified in the previous chapters, this will enable the construction of a research agenda and framework. The chapter also highlights the benefits of a political science perspective in studying the development of electronic participation. The debates on the use of the Internet either for democratic or managerial purposes generally anticipate rapid and transformative change following the implementation of the Internet. Political science as a discipline, on the other hand, is more cautious and measured in its assessment of processes of change than are technology-driven arguments. Unlike these technology-driven arguments, major political science perspectives generally suggest that inertia and stability are the norm in the public sector. There is apparently a paradox. As Hudson (1999) suggests, political science perspectives serve helpfully to highlight the incremental nature of change and to explain variations across different sectors and contexts.

Research on electronic participation tends to assume that the technology will have some influence on political processes. Yet, it could be argued that political processes may also have some impact on the development and implementation of those technologies.

Therefore, it is necessary to explain the nature of technological development. The question is to what extent social and political processes shape technology and to what extent the technology shapes those processes. If technologies were taken as 'given' there would be little scope for purposeful design and policy development. Every elected local authority would be using the Internet in the same way. But this is not the situation, so it seems that we need to look into other processes that play a role in shaping the use of technology. This is achieved by adopting a middle-way approach that allows a better understanding of the complex relationship between technological and social change instead of simply claiming that one determines the other.

The first part of the chapter provides a critique of the existing literature from a political science perspective. This is done under four themes: tendencies for technological

determinism, confusions over definitions of e-democracy and e-government, limited qualitative evidence and lack of meso-level studies. The second part starts to develop a research agenda and framework in order to address these gaps. It suggests a middle way approach in understanding the role of technical, social and political processes on the development of electronic participation. The chapter then develops an operationalisation of the concepts of e-democracy and e-government so that progress towards e-government and e-democracy purposes can be properly distinguished. Finally, the chapter begins to develop a political science approach emphasising the importance of meso-level analysis.

PART 1: CRITIQUE OF THE LITERATURE

Mapping the landscape of existing research

Studies on electronic democracy and participation in particular originate not only from political science (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998; Donk, Snellen and Tops, 1998), but also from other disciplines such as communication studies (Bimber 1998, 1999, 2000; Bonfadelli, 2002). Although this provides a variety of different perspectives, and consequently richness, to the concept, these studies largely fail to connect their claims with theories of participation and democracy. Therefore, there is a need to link the recent electronic democracy debates to more established knowledge on political participation and democracy by adapting a political science perspective. Political scientists have begun to be interested in these issues relatively late (Dutton, 1992). The first significant sign of such an interest in the UK was raised in 1994 when the journal 'Public Administration' dedicated a special issue edited by John Taylor and entitled 'Towards the Information Polity: Public Administration in the Information Age'. Gradually, political scientists started to display an interest in the likely impact of ICTs on policy making, which was broadly labelled as the 'informatization' of public policy. Other early calls were raised by Taylor and Williams (1989, 1990), Horrocks and Webb (1994), and Horrocks and Pratchett (1995).

Political scientists have been interested in a variety of different implications of the Internet for politics. Citizen participation has constituted only a small part of this broad

interest. There have been studies exploring the implications of the Internet within public administration and democratic governance. The studies on the implications of the Internet for public administration are mostly concerned with efficiency and intra-government relations. For example, Margetts (1999) compares the USA and UK in their use of information technology for efficient government. Margetts and Dunleavy (2002) analyse the cultural barriers to implementing e-government. Studies on democratic implications, on the other hand, are concerned with relations between the government and citizens as well as relations between citizens. For example, Budge (1996) considers the potential for a direct democracy model through the use of new technologies. Wilhelm (1999) evaluates the extent to which online discussions contribute to democratic deliberation. Ferdinand (2000) analyses the role of the Internet for democratisation processes.

There have also been studies combining these two approaches. For example, Pratchett (1999) examines the implications of ICTs for the different roles of local government (service delivery *and* democratic decision-making). Bellamy and Taylor (1998) focus on the implications for the new technologies for re-engineering the government *and* renewal of citizenship and democracy. Although this thesis is concerned with the democratic implications of the Internet (specifically electronic participation), it is difficult to isolate this aspect from other implications for public administration. This is also related to the conceptualisations of e-democracy and e-government, which will be discussed later.

Identifying the gaps in the literature

There has been a growing interest in the emerging technologies and their role in the political environment. In addition to the books and articles published on this subject, a number of new journals have also been launched in the area such as Information Communication and Society, Social Science Computer Review, Information Society, Information Polity and various others. This has resulted in a huge literature examining different aspects of the relationship between technology, politics and democracy. However, the value of this literature is limited because of the following:

- Too much focus on technology and tendencies towards technological determinism
- Confusion over definitions of e-democracy and e-government
- Limited qualitative evidence and too great a reliance on the experiences of the USA
- Lack of meso-level studies, especially in the absence of empirical studies

In the following sections, these gaps in the literature will each be considered in detail. Then, the second part of the chapter will explain how these gaps are to be addressed in this research.

Too much focus on technology and tendencies towards technological determinism

This problem has two aspects. One is the issue of technological determinism.

Determinists fall into two camps: utopians and dystopians. The former camp perceives the new technological possibilities as an opportunity to realise a more democratic society, the latter perceives the technology as a threat to democracy. The second issue is related to overemphasising the ‘T’ of the ICTs at the expense of its two other components, which are ‘communication’ and ‘information’ (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998; Bellamy, 2003). Many studies on electronic democracy start from the idea that the Internet might function as a ‘technological panacea’ to heal the ills of representative democracy by introducing opportunities for frequent referendums and direct voting (Grossman, 1995; Becker, 1993). Others, by contrast, claim that it may lead to a ‘Big Brother’ state with the availability of surveillance and monitoring technologies and the manipulation of public opinion (Laudon, 1977; Donk and Tops, 1995).

On the utopian side, Becker (1993), for example, evaluates the evidence from ‘electronic town meeting’ experiments to facilitate citizen participation. He claims that the level of citizen participation in the experiments has far exceeded the levels in conventional processes and that the quality of citizen input has been impressive. Grossman (1995) who is deeply suspicious of the working of representative democracy claims that with ‘keypad’ democracy, people will push buttons to tell congressional representatives what they want and in what priority order. Some of the utopian

interpretations come from non-academic work but they are still significant (Toffler, 1970; Toffler and Toffler, 1995). On the dystopian side, Laudon (1977) warns against the manipulation of public opinion by using cable television. There are also studies exploring the implications of the Internet for privacy (Raab et al, 1996).

While earlier studies were concerned with negative and positive ‘impacts’ of technology, later studies adopted a less deterministic approach claiming that the Internet’s role will be normalised or at least shaped within different contexts. Normative inclinations started to shift towards more descriptive and empirical work. Donk, Snellen and Tops changed the name of their edited book from 'Orwell and Athens' (1995) to 'Orwell in Athens' (1998) showing that there exist a large number of intermediate positions and that these two extremes may operate at the same time within different components of a democracy. Likewise, Margolis and Resnick (2000) claim that cyberspace increasingly reflects the political forces that dominate politics and social life in the real world. Danziger et al (1982) also concluded that computer technologies have not changed the power relations and dominant values within American local government but have reinforced them. The following table gives some examples from these different perspectives.

Table 4.1: Normative and descriptive-empirical approaches to technology

Normative		Descriptive-Empirical
Utopian	Dystopian	Margolis and Resnick (2000)
Toffler and Toffler (1995)	Surveillance, privacy, ‘big brother’ state,	Danziger et al (1982)
Becker and Slaton (2001)	<i>6 et al (2002)</i>	Tsagarousianou (1999)
Becker (1993)	Raab et al (1996)	Donk, Snellen and Tops (1995)
Grossman (1995)		Agre (2002)
		Fountain (2001)

Although these approaches have in common the argument that the impact of the Internet and ICTs in general is shaped depending on different social and political contexts, they differ in their explanations (if they provide an explanation). Margolis and Resnick

(2000) emphasise the 'normalization' of cyberspace suggesting that the Internet tends to reflect and reinforce the patterns of behaviour in the real world and that ordinary politics and commercial activity have invaded and captured cyberspace. The problem with this study is that it does not offer any theoretical explanation of how the cyberspace was normalised and what mechanisms prevented a revolutionary change. Is it because of institutions, existing power relations or what? This limits the value of the study.

The 'reinforcement thesis' of Danziger et al (1982), on the other hand, emphasises the role of power relations and dominant players in keeping the status quo. They claim that the 'precise effects of computer technology on the government and its environment will be contingent on the dominant interests and values of that government' (p. 18). They continue to claim that 'the dominant political coalition need not directly control technological decisions. Rather, those groups who do directly control the technology will attempt to anticipate the values and interests of the dominant coalition and to serve this coalition as means to secure their cooperation and support' (p. 227). Dutton (1990; 1995; 1999) suggests the concept of the 'ecology of games' to understand how ICT develops in a non-predetermined technical path. He suggests that ICT policy develops as a result of strategic and everyday decisions made by many actors in many separate areas. Each actor can be part of various games but they need not be self-interested. He claims that this concept provides a theoretical perspective for discussing the strength and interplay of the groups and interests which shape policy. "The exact nature of this ecology of games is likely to evolve over time and differ across social, political and economic systems" (1995, p. 320).

Although recent studies carefully avoid technological determinism, determinism sometimes comes in disguise. For example, some studies tend to assume that the 'properties of ICTs are both given and generic' (Bellamy, 2003). Hence, there is little interest in how those properties are perceived and constructed within different contexts. Moreover, there is not much interest in exploring how those given properties can be limited in real life contexts. For example, the Internet is praised for its interactivity. However, interactivity is relational. The mere existence of a sender and receiver does not necessarily mean that there is actually a relation between them as exemplified by

Spam emails (Dijk, 2000). Likewise, communication and information are treated as neutral concepts. Issues like that of which actors are connected with the availability of technologies or of which actors are excluded are much less explored. Similarly, issues such as who owns the information, how it is distributed and interpreted are not as popular as exploring the specific features of technologies (exceptions Bellamy, 2003; May and Chadwick, 2001). Bimber (2000) suggests that there is a need for “alternative conceptualisation that focuses on features of information itself rather than on technology” (p. 329).

Confusion over definitions of e-democracy and e-government

The Internet offers great potential to improve the delivery of services and to enhance the democratic process. However, the latter seems to be a peripheral issue, especially among scholars in the UK. Although there is a huge literature in the US about the democratic potential and uses of the Internet, in the UK the interest is more on the service delivery and managerial implications of the Internet. There are some exceptions to this. For example, Coleman (2001) looks at the transformation of the concept of citizenship as a result of the emergence of new media. Chadwick and May (2001) focus on the interaction between states and citizens in the age of the Internet. Needham (2001) compares electronic consultation in the UK and the US. Pratchett (1999) explores the implications of the new ICTs for the democratic role of local government. Nevertheless, the democratic implications of the Internet have not been paid sufficient consideration. To some extent, this is not surprising because as Bellamy (2003) suggests, academic research in the UK is broadly in tune with the government’s own agenda, which is overwhelmed by concerns of efficiency and service delivery⁸.

However, the problem is not that e-democracy is perceived as an afterthought, but that it is sometimes perceived as being identical to e-government. Hagen (2000) claims that “it is the characteristic of British work on the ‘information polity’ that they mix electronic service delivery with issues of electronic democracy capabilities” (p. 61). This could be partially explained by reference to how democracy is defined and

⁸ This is discussed in the previous chapter.

understood. In the UK, there has been an emphasis on 'consumer democracy' and the way it could be supported by the use of ICTs (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998; Bellamy, 2000). As discussed in Chapter 2, the consumer democracy model is based on notions borrowed from public choice theories. It emphasises the availability of different alternatives and opportunities for the consumer to make choices. In this model, it is important to understand the demands of the consumer in order to deliver better services. So, for example, by opening new channels of service delivery and better services, ICTs (including the Internet) are perceived to be contributing to democracy. Citizen participation is perceived not only as a condition for more democratic governance, but also as a tool to assist managerial purposes.

This is not to suggest that e-government and e-democracy are completely unrelated concepts. For example, in Turkey there is no such distinction. There is the concept of 'e-state', which covers both e-government and e-democracy⁹. At a practical level, too, they might be perceived as more or less the same. However, it is important to define them carefully and make a distinction at a conceptual level no matter the understandings of actors in the field.

Limited qualitative evidence and too much focus on the experiences of the US

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a lot of research carried out to understand the potential contribution of the ICTs to democratic processes (Arterton, 1987; Laudon, 1977) based upon empirical evidence. However, the next generation of studies, after the proliferation of the Internet, lacked that empirical focus. On the contrary, much of the debate has been based on mostly optimistic speculations about the future of the society and democracy. More recently, there has been more empirical work in this field.

However, this time there is a bias in favour of quantitative methods. For example, in the local government context, the work of SOCITM, which is based on a survey analysis of local government websites, is an example of that bias. The research demonstrates the differences between local authorities in using the new ICTs. Therefore, it helps in mapping the existing situation and benchmarking the performances of different local

⁹ Although it is important to acknowledge that this is highly related to the political culture in Turkey where government and state are not properly distinguished.

authorities. However, the research offers very little when it comes to explaining why such differences occur. As Bellamy (2003) suggests “we have really few detailed empirical studies that use *thick qualitative or ethnographic methods* to understand the specific social dynamics involved in the shaping of technological applications in particular organisational contexts” (emphasis added, p. 7).

Moreover most of the empirical evidence is based on research in a very few countries notably the United States (and also the Netherlands to a lesser degree). This is not surprising considering that many of the technologies to which we are referring were developed in the US. For example, the roots of the Internet emerged in the US Defence Department. However, it would be deterministic to explain that research body merely by the existence of technologies. In fact, even before the emergence of the Internet there were experiments in televoting in different places in the US (Arterton, 1987). There were experiments such as Santa Monica’s Public Electronic Network (PEN), which enabled citizens to obtain information from the city council, of its services and events; to send and to receive information and electronic mail; to communicate with the departments of the city or to begin debate forums on municipal matters (Dutton, 1992). The QUBE system in Ohio enabled voting and polling from home (Dutton, 1992). Electronic Town Meetings aimed to use several electronic means to reinforce the discussion and to endow citizens with more knowledge so as to enable them to come to an informed opinion on a topic and vote accordingly (Elgin, 1993).

Telephone and other technologies were available in other parts of the world as well, but the US has been a leading country in experimenting with technology for democratic purposes, especially for direct participation. The problem is that while these experiments were carried out solely in the US, the results were generalised for other contexts as well. This approach underestimates the importance of the formal (e.g. presidential system, federalism) and informal institutions (technological optimism, strong belief in individualism) of the US, which may not exist in other political contexts. For example, Hagen (2000) suggests that in Germany direct democracy is distrusted for historical reasons relating to memories of the Weimar Republic. As a

result, policy makers in Germany are less likely to use the Internet for enhancing direct participation.

Lack of meso-level studies

The literature is also limited in the sense that there is a bias towards micro- and macro-level analysis. Studies focusing on micro-level analysis of the developments regarding the Internet are concerned with evaluating the implications of the Internet for individual variables such as voting behaviour (Norris, 2003; Norris and Sanders, 2001). In explaining the development of the ICT strategies of public organisations, these studies focus on career concerns, strategic action and rational choice. A common claim of this approach is that by looking into individual behaviour we can explain change (or otherwise) within a polity. For example, it may be possible to explain successful implementation of the ICTs with the existence of ‘champions’ in a particular organisation.

Studies adopting a macro-level analysis focus on the implications of the Internet at a societal level (Castells, 2001; May, 2002). Unsurprisingly, this group of studies are intertwined with studies on political sociology and they point to developments towards the ‘information society’ (Castells, 2001) or processes of ‘globalisation’ (Khiabany, 2003; Poster, 1999). Within political science, macro-analyses attempt to explain the developments relating to the Internet by appeal to national political institutions (Margetts, 1999) or by casting them as part of broader changes or agendas. For example, in the UK it is possible to evaluate the ICT policies within the parameters of the ‘modernisation agenda’.

A third stream of studies has been concerned with the implications of these developments at an organisational level. They are mostly concerned with issues such as institutional change, change management, cultural barriers and holistic governance. The following table summarises some main themes and selected sources within each level of analysis.

Table 4.2: Varying levels of analysis: Macro, meso, micro

	Macro	Meso	Micro
Main themes	Information society, Globalisation, National political institutions	Technology and institutional change, Cultural barriers, E-governance IT interests and technology adaptation	Voting behaviour Champions Staff resistance
Selected sources	Castells (2001) Khiabany (2003) May (2002) Margetts (1999)	Bellamy and Taylor (1998) Dunleavy and Margetts (2002) 6 et al (2002) Pratchett (1999)	Norris and Sanders (2001) Norris (2003) Willcocks (1991)

Each approach aims to answer different sets of questions and hence they can all make a distinctive contribution to knowledge. Focusing on individual behaviours, Norris (2003) tests the claim that the technology could boost electoral participation in local elections in the UK. Taking a macro approach, Margetts (1999) compares Britain and the US with regard to their information technology strategy and implementation. Macro approaches may be useful in explaining differences between different countries. However, evidence shows that there are big variations between different public organisations *within* the UK in their take up of technologies (Hudson, 1999). Hudson (1999) notes, “explaining why such variations occur and why the impact of ICTs has been far from revolutionary in many settings is an important theoretical task, but one that the informatization theorists have tended to shy away from” (p. 321). There is a need to explain the mechanisms through which macro developments are converted into actions at the organisational level. Moreover referring to systemic changes and assuming that they will somehow affect organisations attributes a passive role to these organisations. It ignores the fact that organisations at a meso-level can play a role in shaping those systemic changes. For example, in the UK local government context, it

may be claimed that the elected local authorities play a role in shaping the national strategy on local e-democracy.

Bellamy (2003) finds the lack of meso-level studies surprising in a field dominated by political scientists. But the fact is that political scientists, especially in the UK, responded to the issues related to the ICTs relatively later than some other disciplines such as business or communication studies. Therefore, although there are many meso-level studies, they tend to focus on issues of business processes, management strategies and so on (Willcocks, 1991). This research aims to address this gap by adopting a meso-level analysis with a political science perspective that centres on the concept of citizen participation. A meso-level analysis also allows a non-deterministic perspective since it does not accept the qualities of the Internet as 'given'.

This part of the chapter identified the gaps in the literature as tendencies for technological determinism, confusion over definitions of e-government and e-democracy, limited qualitative evidence and lack of meso-level studies. The next part explains how this research addresses these gaps.

PART 2: ADDRESSING THE GAPS AND DEVELOPING AN AGENDA

In order to address the gaps identified above, this part first reviews the processes of technological development from different perspectives and suggests a middle way approach, which emphasises the significance of the social shaping and construction of the Internet without ignoring its given properties. Second, the chapter develops an operationalisation of e-government and e-democracy both to clarify the use of these two concepts throughout the thesis and, more importantly, to distinguish developments towards e-government and e-democracy. The chapter concludes by explaining why a meso-level study is necessary.

Explaining the nature of technological development

It is not possible to analyse e-democracy without an implicit or explicit conception of technology and technological development. There are different perceptions of technological development which vary in their understanding of the relation between social and technical processes. These perspectives will be discussed before explaining the position of this research in terms of technological development.

Technological determinism

Technological determinism attributes an autonomous role to technology. Technological development is a process that has its own logic and its own driving force. There is no place for the social processes contained within technological development. The existing or previous technologies have a shaping role in current and future developments.

Therefore, there is a technological path dependency. According to this view, technology sets the conditions for the operation of the social and political system including the political agenda (Street, 1992, p. 20). Marx, for example, claims that the political order should be explained in terms of the production technologies upon which social relationships rely (cited in Street, 1992, p. 31).

A softer version of determinism advocates the view that technology sets only the conditions for politics and does not dictate the form of political structures. According to this approach, the development of technology has an effect on politics and society although it is not the only factor. Winner (1999) explains this by making a distinction between sets of social conditions that are *required* by a particular technology and those that are strongly *compatible with* that technology (p. 33, emphasis original). While the former implies a causal relation between technology and its social environment, the latter holds that a given kind of technology is strongly compatible with, but does not strictly require, social and political relationships of any particular type. Winner also introduces the concept of 'technological somnambulism' to demonstrate the degree to which we ignore the impacts of technologies on social and political processes. He suggests, "a given device might have been designed and built in such a way that it

produces a set of consequences logically and temporally *prior* to any of its professed uses” (Winner, 1999, emphasis original, p. 32).

Social shaping of technology

This view provides an antidote to technological determinism by contending that what matters is not the technology but the social system in which it is embedded. Social relations and political choices affect the development of technology. However, claiming merely that technology is shaped by social processes does not tell us much about the mechanisms that make this happen. The economy is one such mechanism. Social relations affect technological change through the way that they shape the framework of market calculations. Those who are involved in investing in new technologies have to consider the market forces (labour costs, demand factors) in order to make a profit. As Mackenzie and Wajcman (1999) summarise “the way a society is organised, and its overall circumstances, affect its typical pattern of costs, and thus the nature of technological change within it” (p. 14). Political choice is another mechanism of social shaping. States, for example, may sponsor certain technologies especially those related to the national defence or national energy resources. These choices about military technology can have a profound impact on the development of civilian technology. For example, the Internet was developed in a defence department but its later development went beyond military purposes. States can also affect the development of technology through regulations such as patents, taxes and incentives. Political choice can promote certain technologies whilst militating against others.

Social construction of technology

This theory places emphasis upon the processes through which a given technology is socially constructed. Its starting point is that there is no such thing as ‘reality’ and reality is instead a social construction. Therefore, technology is not a given fact; it is a human artefact. It also suggests that a given technology can be interpreted in many ways; therefore there is ‘interpretative flexibility’ (Pinch and Bijker, 1984). This flexibility decreases over time once the meaning is ‘stabilised’ and finally ‘closed’.

The problem with this theory is that it ignores the 'physical reality' of technologies. As Mackenzie and Wajcman (1999) note, it is "too prone to the misconception that there was nothing real and obdurate about what was constructed" (p. 18). Moreover, the suggestion that there is both interpretative flexibility and yet also a point at which interpretation is finished (closure) is contradictory. If society is a dynamic phenomenon, why should the interpretation end? In fact, reviewing their original work later, Klein and Pinch (1999) accept that closure need not be final and that "new problems can emerge and interpretative flexibility may reappear" (p. 114). A third problem is that this approach seems to overemphasise the actor perspective, leading one to believe that the meaning of a particular technology is an aggregation of individual perceptions. It does not mention the role of the broader environment on actors' perception of technology. For example, two managers in two local authorities may perceive the Internet differently because they are part of two different organisational contexts.

Bringing theories of technological development together

The relation between social conditions and the development of technology is far too complex to be explained by either type of determinism - technological or social. As Street (1992) suggests, "we need to retain a spirit of eclecticism" to understand the relationship between social and technical processes. Each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses. For example, technological determinism runs the risk of reducing social processes to results of changes in technology. However, its strength is that it points to particular features of a technology, which may have certain meanings. For example, the reason that there is so much interest in the subject of electronic democracy is that it is believed that the Internet has certain features (such as its decentralised and pluralist nature) that are inherently democratic. However, these meanings of certain technologies cannot be treated independently of the contexts in which they are embedded. As Pratchett (1995) notes,

Technologies possess certain latent qualities that shape their impact upon individuals, organisations, and society in general. At the same time, however, the impact of these technologies is mediated and altered by the social and organisational contexts in which they are deployed and indeed by the very processes through which they are implemented (p. 135).

In fact, many comparative studies show that certain technologies can be interpreted very differently in different social and political contexts (Hagen, 2000; Hoff et al, 2000; Chadwick and May 2001; Uhm Seung-Yong and Hague 2001). However, it is important to understand the mechanisms through which social conditions affect the development of technology.

The emergence of the Internet and its utilisation for commercial, private and academic purposes motivated governments to exploit this technology to improve their services and provide access for citizens. If there were no such technology, central and local governments would not be pursuing those projects. Therefore, as Winner (1999) suggests, there is “adaptation of human ends to available technical means”. However, those technical means are not understood objectively, or in the same way, by all people. The suggestion that technology is a social construct is even more powerful when thinking about the Internet, which is such a diverse and rich phenomenon. It might be difficult to understand a ‘calculator’ as a social construct because it has more or less similar functions and features for everyone. The Internet, on the other hand, might be perceived as an online library by an academic, as a shopping centre by a disabled person, as a job by a network engineer, or as an online exhibition centre by an artist. Therefore, it has great potential for interpretative flexibility. Moreover, millions of actors *physically* contribute to its construction and content by establishing websites, joining online discussions and exchanging emails. Therefore, rather than understanding it as a given technology, it is more useful to perceive the Internet as a social artefact whose meaning is continuously being constructed by many actors. The perceptions of those actors, however, are shaped according to the dominant values and rules that are embedded in particular social and organisational contexts.

This research aims to benefit from these perspectives in explaining how the emergence of the Internet motivates local authorities to use it for online participation (determinism); how the Internet can be understood and made sense of differently in various local authorities (social construction); and how the Internet is used for participation in different ways by different local authorities (social shaping). The research contends that electronic participation strategies develop as a result of a

dialectical relation between these three aspects of technological development. While certain technological features of the Internet (such as interactivity) may lead local authorities to use it for the same purposes (such as consulting people online), there may be organisational and institutional factors that lead to different understandings and perceptions of the Internet. The thesis aims to explain how these factors affect the strategy of local authorities in using the Internet.

Distinguishing e-government and e-democracy

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is confusion over the definitions and the usage of these two concepts. This is not to say that they are completely different; they have common promises. This is also not to undermine e-government projects *vis-à-vis* those related to democracy. However, it is important to define and distinguish these concepts for the purpose of conceptual clarification.

Silcock (2001) defines e-government as “the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees” (p. 88). Therefore, e-government is not only about the relationship between government and citizens, it also involves ‘back office’ applications. In order to make a distinction, it is useful to examine the objectives and claims of e-government and e-democracy. According to Chadwick (2003), e-government promises four sets of goals. First, it claims to reduce the administrative costs of government and creates value for money. Second, e-government aims to provide the means to ‘join up’ various services and create better co-ordination. Third, it aims to improve the effectiveness of public sector organisations by empowering the front line staff and managers and by further enhancing the post-fordist organisational forms. Lastly, it aims to “bring government closer to the people by meeting the expectations of the ‘citizen-customer’ regarding convenience, accessibility and timeliness” (p. 9). On the other hand, e-democracy has different objectives. According to Tsagarousianou (1999), e-democracy has three major claims, which are the improvement of information provision, deliberation, and participation in decision-making. Chadwick (2003) also notes that e-democracy is about consultation, deliberation and participation.

While e-government is mostly concerned with the effective delivery of services and the modernisation of the public sector in general, e-democracy is concerned with the cultivation of an informed and active citizenry as well as informed and responsive representatives. Despite the differences in the focus and purpose of these two concepts, they are often used interchangeably as mentioned in the first part of this chapter.

However, it is necessary to develop an operationalisation of these two concepts in order both to clarify their use throughout the thesis and more importantly to distinguish developments towards e-government and e-democracy. For the purposes of this study, the following operationalisation is developed. The table provides examples of applications of local e-democracy or e-government.

Table 4.3: Operationalising e-democracy and e-government

	E-democracy	E-government
Examples of applications of e-democracy or e-government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online consultation through the website (including polls, questionnaires, forums etc.) • Online relations between the councillors and the citizens (through email or online forms on the website) • Use of the website to support offline consultation (i.e. informing about community forums, council meetings) • Use of the website to provide information about local democracy (elections, councillors, rights of citizens, how the council works, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updating software or hardware for more efficiency • Building or updating Intranet • Use of email between councillors and the officers, among officers, with other agencies • Building call centres for providing information or services • Online transactions such as paying council tax, applying for planning permissions, etc.

Use of email between citizens and officers
 Use of the website to provide information about council services

The distinction between e-government and e-democracy is insufficiently clear-cut to be captured by a simple table. However, the table has some advantages. First, it provides an operationalisation for the purposes of *this* study. It does not suggest that this is the only way of distinguishing these concepts, but it does provide guidance for analysis. Second, the table demonstrates that there are some points where the distinction is more or less clear, while there is a grey area in which the two concepts are intertwined. For example, building an Intranet is clearly not relevant for citizens' participation. However, there is a grey area where it is much more difficult to make a distinction. For example, the use of email between citizens and officers may be only for practical purposes such as communicating the details of social benefits. Alternatively, citizens may use email to raise concerns about council services or to give their opinions on certain issues.

CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR A MESO-LEVEL APPROACH

The chapter provided a critique of the existing literature from a political science perspective. It has identified some gaps in the existing research about the implications of the Internet for enhancing democracy. Among these gaps, the research particularly takes issue with the lack of meso-level studies on the use of the Internet for democratic purposes. A meso-level analysis is necessary for at least two reasons. First, such an analysis allows a non-deterministic perspective, since it does not accept the qualities of the Internet as 'given'. It is vital to explore the way the Internet's use is *shaped* and *designed* within different local authorities. If local authorities are not willing to exploit the new technologies, it does not matter whether those technologies provide the most democratic tools. Second, research evidence shows that there are variations between different political systems and organisations in their capacity and willingness to exploit the Internet for participation purposes (Margetts and Dunleavy, 2002; SOCITM, 2002). Not only the use of the Internet but also the attitudes of local authorities towards citizen involvement as well as actual participation rates (both electoral and non-electoral) varies across localities (Rallings et al, 1996; Parry et al, 1992, Lowndes et al, 2002). It is an important theoretical task to explore why such variations, both in terms of political participation and the use of the Internet, occur. By taking a meso-level approach, the research focuses on the role of formal and informal rules in engendering participation

and in leading to varying approaches towards participation and the Internet. A meso-level analysis makes it possible to understand how given definitions in the literature can be shaped, constructed and enacted differently in different organisational and institutional contexts.

In conclusion, the limitations of the existing literature point to the value of developing an approach which:

- Avoids technological determinism and acknowledges the relationship between social and technical processes.
- Adapts a meso level analysis in order to explain how the Internet can be enacted differently in different contexts.
- Uses qualitative empirical evidence in order to provide thick descriptions of the developments.
- Distinguishes and operationalises the concepts of e-government and e-democracy in order to be able to identify development towards e-government or e-democracy without conflating the two concepts.
- Acknowledges the incremental nature of change without proposing radical transformations.

By identifying the above limitations and explaining how they contribute to the development of this research, this chapter effectively links the theoretical debates with the empirical work that will follow. In order to enable the empirical analysis, the following two chapters provide theoretical and methodological tools. The next chapter explores the benefits of institutional theory as a meso-level approach for providing those tools. Institutional theory is particularly useful in providing a counterargument against approaches that emphasise rapid change in the public sector with the use of the Internet. The subsequent chapter provides a methodological framework for data collection and analysis.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSING LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES: THE CONTRIBUTION OF NEW INSTITUTIONALISM

INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in Chapter 4, political scientists reacted to the issues related to the use of the Internet later than some other disciplines such as business or communication studies. Emphasising this point, Fountain (2001) notes that information technology has yet to be theorized within the central paradigms of political science. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the main purpose of this research is to analyse how the strategies of local authorities in relation to the use of the Internet for political participation develops. In this endeavour, it is essential to understand the main influences that come to shape those strategies and to constrain the potential for using the Internet for political participation purposes. It is in providing a way of addressing this question that the value of institutional analysis becomes evident.

Institutional theory provides accounts of the constraints that institutions impose on action. Studies that adapt an institutional approach tend to emphasise difficulties of change and barriers to the implementation of the new technologies. In this way, they provide an explanation of why the Internet is not used to its full potential for democratic purposes. Institutional theory also helps to explain variations across different organisational contexts in terms of Internet use. Taking an institutional approach, Agre (2002) suggests that the Internet introduces change, but that the dynamics of the change can be understood only in the ways in which the Internet is 'appropriated' in different contexts (p. 316). Likewise, Jane Fountain (2001) proposes a distinction between 'objective' and 'enacted' technology to illustrate that objective technology is made sense of, designed and used (when they are used) through the mediation of existing organisational and institutional arrangements (p. 12). Her approach emphasises the role of 'mediation' through existing routines, values and patterns of behaviour. This research extends institutional theory by applying its tools in explaining the development of the electronic participation strategies of local government. In this sense, it builds on

previous work on the informatization of public sector, which was also based on institutionalist approaches (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998; Fountain, 2001). However, it differs from these studies by focusing specifically upon participation and democracy, rather than the analysis of informatization as a whole.

Although institutional theory has not been used much in the analysis of the use of the Internet in the public sector, recent years have witnessed a revival of interest in institutional analysis in general. This interest is present in various disciplines such as organisation theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991), sociology (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1988), and economics (North, 1990). Political scientists have also been interested in various aspects of institutionalism. Some of them consider the role of institutionalism as a major approach in political science (Rhodes, 1995; Goodin, 1996; Lowndes, 2002). Others use institutionalism as a guide for their empirical work (e.g. Lowndes and Wilson (2001) on the development of social capital by institutional design; Fountain (2001) on explaining technological change).

The literature on institutionalism covers a vast amount of research that introduces a multiplicity of concepts and issues. This chapter does not attempt to provide a comprehensive review of this broad literature. However, there are some important issues that have to be addressed. One of those issues is the extent to which institutions constrain individual behaviour. In other words, is there a place for human agency in institutionalist thinking? Another issue is related to explaining the mechanisms through which individuals are constrained by institutions. It is important to explain how institutions are perceived, enacted and made sense of. Institutionalism is not a coherent body of literature that would provide consistent answers to these issues. There are varieties of institutionalism emphasising different aspects of institutional life. This is at once a weakness and a strength of institutionalism. It is a weakness because institutionalism can be criticised for not constituting a coherent theory. But it is also an advantage because this makes institutionalism a fertile ground for intellectual borrowing between different theoretical approaches.

Institutionalism can be useful for two different analytical purposes. Political institutions can be understood as both a 'context' and as a 'process'. For the purposes of this study, it is possible to conceptualise an *institutional context* within which actors in a local authority make decisions about the use of the Internet for participation. Second, the whole process initiated by central government to use the Internet for citizen participation can be seen as an *institutional design process*. There is a deliberate attempt in many developed countries, including the UK, to use the Internet for both democratic and managerial purposes. The established knowledge on institutional design assists analysis of how this deliberate design attempt is constrained and enabled.

This chapter has four purposes. First, it provides background information about new institutionalism. This includes the development of a working definition of institutions as well as the explanation of major strains of new institutionalism and identification of their common premises. It is also concerned with exploring the role of human agency in new institutionalism. Second, the chapter focuses on conceptualising institutional context and institutional design. This includes principles of good design and potential problems during a design process. Third, it provides a conceptualisation of different stages of the institutionalisation process. Finally, the chapter links these concepts with the purposes of this research and arrives at some research propositions that will guide the empirical part of the research.

CONCEPTUALISING NEW INSTITUTIONALISM AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Introducing new institutionalism

New institutionalism came into existence as a reaction to two disciplinary approaches in political science: the behavioural and rational choice approaches¹⁰, which dominated the field in the 1950s and 1960s. These approaches generated fundamental shifts in the way political science was studied. Before the emergence of these approaches there was a school of institutionalism whose work constituted the basis of political science. In fact,

¹⁰ This should be qualified as there is a rational choice version of new institutionalism, which will be discussed later.

institutionalism *was* the political science (Lowndes, 2002, p. 90). According to Peters (1999a), old institutionalism was concerned with law and the central role of law in governing (legalism). Structures were important in determining behaviour (structuralism). It was concerned with studying and comparing different formal legal systems as a whole (holism) and had a pronounced historical foundation for their analysis (historicism). There was also a strong normative element in their analysis and an explicit concern with 'good government'.

This changed when the neoclassical paradigm gained dominance in economics, which was followed by a shift towards behaviourism in political science. Only after the 1980s did institutionalism emerge again as 'new institutionalism' initially with the works of March and Olsen (1984, 1989). In their seminal article (1984), they criticised behavioural and rational choice theories in five respects: contextualism, reductionism, utilitarianism, functionalism, and instrumentalism. They argued that political science at that time had a tendency to subordinate political phenomena to contextual phenomena such as economy and society. March and Olsen (1984) wanted to reassert that political institutions are actors in their own right. They also criticised mainstream political science at the time as reductionist: based on an understanding of institutions as an aggregation of individual behaviour. They claimed that behavioural and rational choice approaches were utilitarian in the sense that they valued decisions for their consequences for the individual rather than for their intrinsic value. Political science was dominated by instrumentalism or the domination of outcomes over processes. Finally, March and Olsen (1984) criticised the mainstream approaches to history as functionalist and as moving towards some equilibrium.

From old to new

New institutionalism is based on different tools and a different focus of analysis from its old version. The tools of analysis have ceased to be the tools of the 'lawyer and historian' (Rhodes, 1995). The focus of analysis has shifted away from the idea of institutions as 'organisations'. Another fundamental difference between the two institutionalisms is in their conceptualisation of the environment. New institutionalism

does not restrict the concept of 'environment' to geographical localities. Instead, new institutionalists focus on non-local environments such as organisational fields.

"Environments, on this view, are more subtle in their influence; rather than being co-opted by organisations, they penetrate the organisation, creating the lenses through which actors view the world and the very categories of structure, action and thought" (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991, p. 13).

Although there is a tendency to emphasise the difference between the old and the new, Lowndes (2002) suggests, new institutionalism is "actually building upon the insights of the best of traditional institutionalists within the context of more explicit and sophisticated theoretical frameworks" (p. 97). March and Olsen (1984) note that new institutionalism is "blending elements of old institutionalism into the non-institutional styles of recent theories of politics" (p. 738). In fact, new institutionalists continue to use traditional methods such as case study, comparative and historical methods. The difference is that they tend to offer theoretical propositions to guide their investigation. Instead of exaggerating the differences between the two institutionalist approaches, it is useful to analyse shifts along continua. Lowndes (2002, p. 97) suggests six analytical continua where new institutionalism departs from the old.

- *From a focus on organisations to a focus on rules:* Political institutions are no longer equated with political organisations. Rather, they are seen as sets of rules that guide and constrain the behaviour of actors.
- *From a formal to an informal conception of institutions:* New institutionalism focuses upon both formal and informal conventions. The latter are not consciously designed or specified in writing. They are the routines, customs, traditions, and conventions that are part of habitual action.
- *From a static to a dynamic conception of institutions:* Institutions are often associated with stability and continuity. Institutions are treated as things which sustain over time and which are hard to change. New institutionalists, on the other hand, treat institutions as processes that are open to change.
- *From submerged values to a value-critical stance:* Old institutionalism was concerned with values and norms that would create 'good government'. New

institutionalists, on the other hand, are concerned with finding out how different institutions embody different values. They claim that the structure of governance is not value neutral but embedded in and sustaining of political values (Pierre, 1999, p. 390).

- *From a holistic to a disaggregated conception of institutions:* New institutionalists tend to focus on various aspects and components of the government machine instead of studying government as a whole. Therefore, there is an assumption that institutions within the same environment may operate in different directions.
- *From independence to embeddedness:* New institutionalists stress that political institutions are not independent entities existing outside of space and time. They are embedded in their wider social, economic, geographic and political context. They reflect the general values of the society they are embedded within.

The distinction is not clear-cut and 'new institutionalism' is not so new any more, as it was first coined by March and Olsen in 1984. Thus, the term institutionalism will be used hereafter.

What is an institution?

Institution is a slippery term because it is used to refer social phenomena at various levels. This is especially the case with the development of new institutionalism. While old institutionalism was concerned with purely formal and legal arrangements, new institutionalism is also concerned with informal elements, which may include codes of behaviour, symbol systems, customs or culture. This brings with it the risk of conceptual stretching. As Rothstein (1996) and John (1998) point out, if the concept of an institution means everything then it means nothing.

What is an institution then? According to Goodin (1996), institution refers to the "stable, recurring, repetitive, and patterned nature of behaviour" (p. 22). Lowndes and Wilson (2003) define an institution as "formal and informal rules that guide and constrain political behaviour". Scott (1995) suggests that 'institutions consist of

cognitive, normative, and regulative, structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behaviour' (p. 33). Hall (1986) defines institutions as "formal rules, compliance procedures and standard operating practices that structure relationships between individuals in various units of the polity and the economy" (cited in Rhodes, 1995, p. 54).

There is a consensus that the main political institutions provide the 'rules of the game'. The problem emerges when it comes to defining these rules. If we only include formal institutions, there is a risk of excluding informal but important rules that are taken for granted and that influence behaviour. If we include informal rules then there is a risk of treating everything that guides individual behaviour as political institution. One way of dealing with this problem is suggested by Peter Hall (1986) who offers the concept of 'standard operating procedures' as a way of distinguishing institutions from other kinds of recurring behaviour such as personal habits. Accordingly, institutions are the rules that are agreed upon and followed by agents either explicitly or tacitly. They are shared among actors and they can be identified and explained by them. They are different from broader customs and personal habits.

Evidently, it is difficult to come up with a simple definition of a political institution because any such definition runs the risk either of straightjacketing the concept or of making a broad but meaningless definition. However, it is possible to suggest some elements that help in understanding what an institution is.

- *Institutions are stable and patterned.* Circumstantial or temporary rules do not count as institutions. Because they are stable, they have legitimacy and they are valued in themselves and not simply for their immediate purposes and outputs (Lowndes, 1996, p. 182). Institutions shape human action by imposing constraints and creating opportunities. But they are also created and adapted by individual agents. In the local government context, annual budget cycles are institutions that pattern the behaviour of officers and members every year.

- *Institutions have formal and informal aspects.* Some may be clearly specified in a written form, such as constitutions, while others may be tacitly agreed upon without any formal requirement such as ‘community leadership’ in local government. They have normative, regulative and cognitive aspects (Scott, 1995). They are carried through various conveyances such as cultures, social structures and routines (Scott, 1995).
- *Institutions may operate in different spheres.* They may be specific to a particular organisation or shared in a specific community or locality, or exist society-wide (Lowndes, 1999). ‘Public service ethos’ may be an institution shared among all local authorities while a particular local authority may have a ‘partnership agreement’, which is an institution specific to that organisation.
- *Institutions are nested within others* with multiple overlapping connections (March and Olsen, 1984). The most deeply nested rules are the most difficult ones to change and they provide the stable environment for ordinary changes (Goodin, 1996). They are connected to their environment and respond to pressures and needs from outside. Change in a particular local authority may be difficult because of the wider institutional environment. For example, all laws have to be compatible with the Constitution, which is a deeply nested rule.

Despite these points, defining institutions in relation to specific fieldwork is difficult. There is a methodological problem of measurement and verification (Peters, 1999b). In order to clarify what is meant by an institution, Chapter 8 develops an operationalisation for the purposes of this study and discusses its limitations. Difficulties in defining institutions partly stem from the existence of different varieties of institutionalisms, which is discussed next.

Different strains of new institutionalism

New institutionalism does not constitute a single and coherent body of theory but comprises many streams of argument and debate (Lowndes, 1996). New institutionalists

diverge from each other on various grounds. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) claim that there are as many 'new institutionalisms' as there are social sciences. Moreover, even within a single discipline, e.g. political science, there are variations in the emphasis on normative and cognitive aspects of institutions, on the relation between the individual and institutions and so on.

Categorisations of new institutional thinking are differentiated by the way in which they define institutions, what value/role they attribute to institutions, how they perceive the role of individuals in an institutional environment, how they define the source of preferences and how they perceive the effects of history on current decisions. In this rich body of thinking, Hall and Taylor (1996) identify three varieties of new institutionalism (historical, rational choice and sociological). Peters (1999a) suggests seven varieties of new institutionalism that include novel ones such as international institutionalism and empirical institutionalism. Arguably, the most basic cleavage within new institutionalist thinking is between normative and rational choice approaches. Kato (1996), for example, talks about 'socio-historical' versus 'rational behaviour' approaches. Similarly, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) contrast 'rational actor' versus 'sociological' approaches while Hall (1996) notes the same contradiction with the metaphor of 'culture' versus 'calculus'. The rational choice approach argues that political institutions emerge to solve collective action problems. They provide the context within which actors calculate their costs and benefits. They "provide information about others' likely future behaviour and about the incentives (and disincentives) attached to different courses of action" (Lowndes, 2002, p. 95).

The sociological approach, on the other hand, is concerned with the way in which institutions construct meanings, preferences and even the very identity of individuals. According to this approach, institutions influence actors' behaviour by shaping their "values, norms, interests, identities and beliefs" (March and Olsen, 1989, p. 17).

Institutions provide guidelines and templates within which individuals can accomplish their tasks. Accordingly, what we see as rational action is socially constituted (Hall and Taylor, 1996); preferences are endogenous, based on the experiences of the individual within the institution. The basic cleavage mentioned above is also related to another

tension within new institutionalist thinking. This concerns the relation between human agency and structure, which is discussed below.

Another important variant, historical institutionalism, is an eclectic approach using both normative and rational choice explanations for individual behaviour. It is criticised for its eclectic position in terms of not having developed its own suggestions about the relation between institutions and human agency (Hay and Wincott, 1998). Historical institutionalism (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992; Hall and Taylor, 1998) is concerned with investigating how previous choices made about institutional design of government systems impact upon the future decision making of individuals. Historical institutionalists have developed the concept of 'path dependency' in order to underpin the importance of past decisions.

Another potential difference between new institutionalists is related to their understanding of how institutions affect behaviour. Is it because there are certain formal sanctions or is it related to more normative and cognitive factors? In order to address this question, it is useful to consider three varieties of institutionalism: normative, rational choice and sociological. According to the rational choice version of institutionalism, institutions are arrangements of rules and incentives that the actors respond to. Individuals are instrumentally motivated to make their choices according to a utilitarian logic. They have given/exogenous preferences, which are not altered by membership in the institution. According to the normative version of institutionalism, whose primary advocates are March and Olsen (1984, 1989), socially mediated values and normative frameworks structure choices. Actors conform not because it serves their narrowly defined individual interests, but because it is expected of them. March and Olsen (1989) explain this by distinguishing a 'logic of appropriateness' from a 'logic of instrumentality' which is central to rational choice models. They argue that actors functioning within institutions behave as they do because of normative standards rather than their desire to maximise individual utilities.

According to sociological institutionalists, compliance occurs because other types of behaviour are inconceivable; routines are followed because they are taken for granted as

'the way we do things' (Scott, 1995). Unlike the normative theorists, who focus on the constraining force of norms, cognitive theorists point to the importance of guidelines for sense making and choosing meaningful actions. Actors do so by imitating the ways of others whom they regard as exemplars. The bases for compliance are practices whose authority is taken for granted. Meyer and Rowan (1977) introduced cultural elements to institutional analysis by calling attention to institutionalised beliefs, rules and roles. There are symbolic elements capable of affecting behaviour. This approach emphasises the creation of meaning and perceptions in organisations. On this view, institutions are systems of meaning and the behaviour of individuals depend on the meanings incorporated and symbols manipulated (Peters, 1999a, Ch. 6). Organisations use symbols to define themselves and to create desired patterns of behaviour. The sociological version of institutionalism has become more concerned with how the members of an institution perceive situations within their structure and the 'frames' that they bring to bear on those situations in order to make decisions about them. Compared with normative institutionalism, this approach has more to do with perception than evaluation. From a normative perspective, institutions tell actors what the appropriate behaviour would be in any situation. From a sociological perspective, membership in an institution creates 'perceptual frames' (Peters, 1999a, p. 103) for sense making. Hence, for both normative and sociological approaches, enforcement mechanisms need not be explicit and external; they are internalised. Actors are habituated to accepting the norms and values of their organisations (Berger and Luckman, 1967 cited in Peters 1999a, p. 103).

While some authors are associated with one of the varieties of new institutionalism, others focus on common features of different institutionalisms and suggest that they may be compatible. For example, Immergut (1998), Kato (1996) and Hall and Taylor (1996) suggest that there is a potential for cross bordering between rational choice, historical and sociological institutionalism. Peters (1999a, pp. 141-151) is also concerned with whether there is indeed one approach within the several varieties of new institutionalism. He mentions three binding arguments among these varieties. First, all approaches argue that institutions do matter and institutional factors are the most appropriate points of departure for social analysis. Therefore, even within the rational

choice version of institutionalism, where individuals appear to be the primary animator, institutions enjoy some existence independent of individuals. Second, institutions persist while individuals come and go. Third, institutionalism argues that institutions increase the regularity of human behaviour and therefore enhance the explanatory and predictive capacity of the social sciences.

Immergut also (1998) notes that “all varieties are concerned with the difficulties of ascertaining what human actors want when the preferences expressed in politics are so radically affected by the institutional contexts in which these preferences are voiced” (p. 25). All are concerned with analysing the effects of rules and procedures on the conversion of individual behaviour into collective decisions. “It is possible to say that they are united by a common scepticism toward atomistic accounts of social processes and a common conviction that institutional arrangements and social processes matter” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991, p. 3). Each variety is a set of lenses to illuminate different aspects of political structures and behaviour and they all have important blind spots (Peters, 1999b, p. 12). Although sociological institutionalism originates from another discipline, a good deal of the institutional analysis in the discipline of political science *per se* draws heavily from its sociological heritage. This research aims to draw on different varieties of new institutionalism, especially normative and sociological, in order to illuminate different aspects of the research agenda.

The role of the individual: Benefiting from the structure and agency debate

Institutionalism mainly argues that political behaviour is constrained within an institutional context. This implies that the individual behaviour is in fact ordered and structured. For this reason institutionalism can be treated as a structuralist approach. At least it is possible to claim that new institutionalism has structuralist tendencies (Hay, 2002). Here I am not particularly concerned with discussing whether institutionalism is a structuralist approach or not. However, in order to understand the role of the actor (individual or organisation) in institutionalist thinking, it is necessary to touch on one of the most important issues of political science, structure and agency.

Fundamentally, the structure and agency debate concerns the issue of the extent to which actors have the ability to shape their destiny as against the extent to which their lives are structured in ways beyond their control (McAnulla, 2002, p. 271). Structure usually refers to context, to the material conditions which define the range of actions available to actors (McAnulla, 2002). Agency refers to the capacity of actors to affect their environment. It implies more than mere political action or conduct; it implies a sense of free will, choice or autonomy that the actor could have behaved differently and that this choice between potential courses of action was subject to the actor's conscious deliberation (Hay, 2002, pp. 94-95).

Structuralism is the explanation of political effects, outcomes and events exclusively in terms of structural or contextual factors (Hay, 2002, p. 102). Structuralists tend to marginalize the role of actors in their analysis. Can we say that new institutionalism has the same tendency to undermine the role of actors? There are at least three points that distinguish new institutionalism from structuralist approaches in this respect. First, institutions are interpreted, recreated and enacted by actors. They are not things that are imposed from above. Rather they provide a non-determinant context within which individuals may have different choices and may choose not to comply. The institutional setting influences the perceptions of individuals. For example, their departmental identity shapes their 'selective perception' by focusing attention on different phenomena and by interpreting those phenomena differently (Scharpf, 1997). But this does not mean that actors' behaviour can be predicted easily by looking at the rules. This is partly related to the existence of conflicting institutions within the same setting. For example, during a reform process there might be old and new institutions existing together. There might also be institutions with different levels of seriousness/robustness; that is to say, non-compliance to one may bring more punishment than non-compliance to the other. Similarly, individuals may sometimes want to take a risk and break the rules. Their motivation may be the hope of realising a future benefit for taking the risk. Alternatively, they may be seeking external legitimisation by doing something that is internally illegitimate. In these cases, individuals will make choices that may not be predictable.

Secondly, there is scope for individuals to change institutions by intentional design. Although this is not an easy task, it is still possible where sufficient attention is paid to good design principles (this is discussed later, pp. 128-131). Thirdly, institutions do not refer simply to material factors constraining behaviour. They also refer to rules, norms and conventions, which emerge and evolve out of human action. In the words of Hay (2002), “institutionalism, like constructivism, draws attention to the *intersubjective* nature of structure and hence to the role of agents in the constitution of the very contexts within which their political conduct occurs and acquires significance” (emphasis original, p. 106).

There are different levels of emphasis given to the role of actors within institutional thinking. Rational choice theorists regard individual preferences as prior to institutions. Accordingly, individuals construct political institutions to solve collective action problems. The sociological-normative approach, on the other hand, claims that individual preferences are shaped by institutions. In this sense, this approach may be seen as having more structuralist tendencies. However, Lowndes (2002) suggests that sociological-normative approaches actually allow more room for reflexivity and human agency than might initially seem to be the case. She notes that

Rules are seen as producing variation and deviation as well as conformity and standardisation; this is because there are always areas of ambiguity in the interpretation and application of rules (not least because individuals vary in terms of their own values and experiences), and because rules are adapted by actors seeking to make sense of changing environments (Lowndes, 2002, p. 105).

In short, the influence of institutions on individual perceptions and behaviour constitutes an ongoing debate within new institutionalist thinking. Hay and Wincott (1998) contend that this approach must consider the relationship between structure and agency as a central analytic concern. In this research, individuals are not seen as passive actors. As Lowndes (2002) puts it, “new institutionalists concern themselves not just with the impact of institutions upon individuals, but with the *interaction* between institutions and individuals” (emphasis original, p. 91). Relying on an institutionalist

framework does not necessarily entail undermining the role of human agency. This is not to advocate the ‘picking and mixing’ of different ontological approaches (Blyth, 2002, p. 295). In fact, this approach is in line with recent tendencies in social sciences, which allow movement beyond the opposition of structure and agency (i.e. structuration theory of Anthony Giddens, 1984).

This section has introduced institutionalism and its main claims. Instead of developing a restrictive definition of institutions, the chapter listed some elements that help understanding this concept. Having reviewed the several varieties of new institutionalism and suggested a theoretical core among different varieties, the chapter also addressed the issue of the extent to which individuals are constrained by their institutional environment. Up until this point, the chapter has been concerned with conceptualising an institutional context; in the next part, the focus is on institutional design as a process.

CONCEPTUALISING INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

Although it is possible to conceptualise an institutional context, we also need to consider the fact that institutions do not stay still. An important question within institutional thinking concerns whether or not institutions are subject to change. If they do change, how does that change occur? For some purposes, an institution is treated as an entity, as a cultural or social system. For other purposes, we might be interested in institutionalisation as a process. For example, sociological institutionalism is concerned with understanding the process within which meanings are created. This research is interested in both of these conceptualisations. The latter might sound problematic, since the research does not have a sufficient time span to evaluate this process. However, the research does not claim to answer the question of whether this institutional design process has succeeded or not. The purpose is to illuminate the design process *as it continues* in different local authorities.

This part focuses first on the possibility of institutional change and the processes by which change occurs. Then it focuses on ‘institutional design’ as a particular process of

change. This part includes principles of good design and reactions to institutional design. Finally, it considers stages of 'institutionalisation'. Focusing on design within institutional theory is especially interesting for the purposes of this research. In emphasising the significance of the top-down mobilisation of participation and social shaping of the Internet, the research attributes a special role to 'design'. Although the main interest is in intentional design processes, explaining other forms of institutional change is also important for situating theories of institutional design in relation to other sources of change. Furthermore, awareness of alternative forms also makes it possible to acknowledge that there may be important interactions between evolutionary and interventionist aspects of institutional change. To put it more specifically, there is an ongoing process in the local government context towards more involvement of citizens. Within this ongoing process, more recently, there has been an intentional effort to embed citizen participation in the working of local government. There may be significant interactions between these ongoing/evolutionary changes and intentional processes.

Stability and Change

The concept of an institution connotes stability and persistence. However, the basis for this stability is a matter of debate. According to Scott (1995), the reason we attach importance to stability is associated with our notion of institutions. Sociological theorists tend to emphasise the important role played by the unconscious, taken for granted assumptions, while rational choice theorists are more likely to stress the importance of interest, cost, agency and social power. Actors may use power to protect their valued interests and to see that these interests are secure over time. However, the persistence of institutions may not depend on such power relations. Institutions are so embedded in practices and procedures that it may be impossible to change them. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) suggest that individual practices are so embedded in a broader network of practices that change in one area will inevitably require changes in many other areas.

Stability and maintenance does not imply passivity on the part of the agent. Nor does it mean institutions do not change. Some authors label institutional stability as 'inertia' (Genschel, 1997), which attributes a passive role to individuals and which makes change sound impossible. However, Offe (1996) suggests the term 'identical reproduction' (p. 208) instead of 'inertia' in order to capture the fact that stability is a process rather than a steady state.

Although institutions are often associated with stability, this does not mean that they do not change. The notion of institutional change is again related to how institutions are conceptualised. If they are conceptualised as formal rules then they may be easy to change. The rational choice institutionalists, for example, tend to see change as quite easy; all one needs to do is to change the incentives, and behaviour will almost immediately change. Socio-historical institutionalists, on the other hand, assume that change is difficult to plan and design. This is related to the uncontrollability of change as well as difficulties in changing values and norms that are deeply embedded. Different varieties of institutionalism have different understandings of the nature of institutional change. Historical institutionalism emphasises punctuations in history such as revolutions, wars and natural disasters through which institutions change. Normative institutionalists emphasise the incremental and evolutionary nature of institutional change.

The views of three authors who have suggestions about how and when institutions do change are examined: Goodin (1996), Offe (1996) and March and Olsen (1989). According to Goodin (1996), institutions change in three ways: through accident, evolution and intentional design. The first is purely a matter of contingency where there is no causal mechanism or explanation. The second mechanism, evolution, works as in the natural selection mechanism. Those institutions that fit their environment survive while others become extinct. The third suggests that change might be a product of intentional intervention/design. This could be product of deliberate interventions of goal seeking agents. The results of their intervention may or may not meet their purposes/intentions, but they are still the product of an intentional design.

According to Offe (1996), institutions break down in response to any one of three challenges. First they may fail to inculcate the norms and preferences that condition the loyalty of members. On these occasions, institutions cease to make sense and they are not taken seriously. This could be a result of a scandal or a slow cultural change. Second, institutions may decay because alternatives emerge which allow for the satisfaction of those needs and the fulfilment of those functions over which the institution used to hold a monopoly (Offe, 1996). Third, institutions may break down because of their manifest failure to perform the functions with which they are charged. Offe (1996) also adds that institutions may change as a survival strategy.

According to March and Olsen (1989), most institutional action results neither from extraordinary processes or forces, nor from heroic interventions, but rather from relatively stable, routine processes that relate institutions to their environments (p. 58). They introduce six basic perspectives of such routine adaptive systems. Accordingly, institutions may change as a result of evolution, problem solving, experiential learning, negotiation between actors, contagion and turnover of actors.

Suggesting these different mechanisms does not necessarily entail that institutions change through one of them. Institutional change may involve a combination of all these elements. For example, an external trigger such as a change in technology may open a new window of opportunity for institutional change. Purposeful actors may then negotiate institutional change with other actors in order to benefit from this external trigger.

Some of the explanations of institutional change emphasise the role of agency in facilitating change while others focus on the natural evolution of institutions or the role of external factors. For example, March and Olsen's (1989) 'negotiation' mechanism works as a bargaining process between actors. Likewise, Goodin's (1996) 'intentional design' perception starts from the notion of goal-seeking agents. On the other hand, institutions may change as a result of external factors such as the emergence of alternative institutions externally. The organisation may adapt those institutions by way of 'contagion' (March and Olsen, 1989). Similarly, institutions may change as a result

of sudden external shocks such as war or revolution. However, as March and Olsen (1989) suggest, change usually results from routine processes. In fact, placing too great an emphasis on sudden breaks threatens to detract from the 'stickiness' and 'lock in' aspects of institutions (Thelen, 2003).

In order to comprehend processes of both stability and change, Thelen (2003) offers the concepts of institutional 'layering' and 'conversion' (p. 225). Institutional layering refers to a process by which actors layer new arrangements on top of pre-existing structures. In this way, it is possible to work around the old institutions without provoking too much opposition. Thelen (2003) suggests constitutional change as a process of layering. "Constitutions often evolve through a layering process that preserves much of the core while adding amendments through which rules and structures inherited from the past can be brought into synch with changes in the normative, social and political environments" (p. 228). In the local government context, it is possible to argue that the Comprehensive Performance Assessment framework was layered on top of procedures of Best Value.

Institutional conversion refers to processes by which institutions designed with one set of goals in mind are redirected to other ends. These processes may be triggered when there are changes in the environment confronting actors with new problems. In these cases, actors may use existing institutions in new ways or in the service of new goals (Thelen, 2003, p. 228). The concepts of institutional layering and conversion allow a more sophisticated approach to debates on institutional change and stability by capturing the innovation and stability elements of institutional life.

Intentional institutional design

Institutional design is not limited to changing formal rules and structures. It goes beyond structural design such as changes in management, organisational charts or reshuffling of departments. Institutional design also involves emphasising new values or creating new patterns of behaviour. It requires conscious efforts to change the cultural and ideational elements of the institution as well as its structural elements (Linder and

Peters, 1995, p. 144). Structural changes do not necessarily lead to changes in values because participants over time ascribe value to organisational structures and processes beyond their technical instrumental qualities (Olsen, 1997).

If institutional design is more than structural change, and if it involves changing the rules of the game, an obvious question is: to what extent is institutional design possible, considering that actors are constrained by their institutional context? How is it possible to change the rules that inhibit change? This question is partly concerned with the relation between structure and agency, which has been discussed above. I explained that institutions not only constrain actors but also offer opportunities to be exploited. It is vital to understand how institutional arrangements create opportunities for actors to design new institutions. Some institutional arrangements may deliberately include a certain level of flexibility as a survival strategy. For example, many constitutions are open to new interpretations and amendments in order catch up with the changes in society. Although the core is usually preserved, there is scope for political actors to design new institutions.

In the same vein, there may be variation in the extents to which actors are constrained by their institutional contexts within a single organisation. Some departments may be less constraining than others, and actors in less constraining departments may have more opportunities for institutional design.

This is not to suggest that institutional design is an easy process. It certainly has various limitations. First, although the word 'intentional' may be thought to imply that the whole design process is under the control of some designer, Goodin (1996) discredits 'the myth of the intentional designer and intentional design' because institutions are "often the product of intentional activities gone wrong" (Goodin, 1996, p. 28). Lanzara (1998) also points out the role of existing competencies and resource endowments in designing new institutions:

As an institutional framework develops and consolidates, actors learn how to live with it and develop specific skills, routines, and practices, which are deeply interpenetrated with the framework: they are 'formed' within and through the

framework, which makes them effective and meaningful. For example, actors learn institution specific codes; develop institution-specific knowledge, build-up institution specific embedded networks of interpersonal relations (emphasis original, p. 12).

Moreover, some actors within an organisation may perceive design processes as disruptive and unnecessary. In short, there are some issues that have to be considered during a design process. The next section reviews these good design principles. After that, the chapter focuses upon the other end of the design by considering actors' reactions to design processes.

Principles of 'good' design

There have been various suggestions about when and how design efforts are likely to succeed and which principles should be applied in the design of institutions (Goodin, 1996; Olsen, 1997).

The table below presents a list of factors that are likely to facilitate the success of design initiatives. However, these are not the only principles for designing institutions. There may be other principles and strategies which have a more functionalist approach or which rely upon top-down engineering of institutions.

Table 5.1: Factors that would facilitate the success of institutional design

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Recognising existing institutions● Clarity about values● Considering the nested nature of institutions● Considering the multiple design processes● Promoting local variation● Timing |
|---|

Recognising existing institutions

Usually new designs are resisted because “those affected see reform proposals not as improvements and progress but as disruptive, resource-demanding, painful and threatening in terms of status, power and policy consequences” (Olsen, 1997, p. 211). This resistance is even greater if existing institutions are embedded within a wider institutional environment. The ideal designer is one who recognises the importance of existing institutions. Goodin (1996) suggests an institutional design should be considered as a *re-designing* process. Institutions are not constructed from a *tabula rasa*; they are built on existing institutions. In the words of Offe (1996), institutional *gardening* rather than institutional *engineering* is more likely to be successful (p. 219).

Clarity about values

Reformers are more likely to be successful if their intentions are focused and well defined rather than ambiguous (Olsen, 1991). There must be clarity about the values being promoted (and challenged) within institutional reform programmes (Lowndes and Wilson, 2003, p. 281). The design process should be underpinned by a clear, and preferably shared, set of values. Moreover, because institutionalisation is an ongoing process, value clarity has to be maintained over time (Lowndes and Wilson, 2003, p. 283).

Considering the nested nature of institutions

Institutions are nested within others with multiple overlapping connections (March and Olsen, 1984). There is a hierarchy whereby change becomes increasingly costly at each successive stage. The problems of institutional change are particularly acute in any structure of nested intentions and interests (March and Olsen, 1989, p. 57). Change is difficult if an institution is integrated into a larger political and social order so that change in one institution requires changes in several others (Olsen, 1997). Olsen (1997) also argues that the design of political institutions cannot be seen in isolation from the properties of the citizens. However, sometimes designers might have ambitions to introduce a more ‘robust’ design process in order to achieve greater changes (Lowndes and Wilson, 2003). They may actually be aiming to change values.

Considering the multiple design processes

Goodin (1996) notes that “there is no single design or designer. There are just lots of localized attempts at partial design cutting across one another and any sensible scheme for institutional design has to take account of that fact” (p. 28). Once a design process starts, this may encourage other actors to design new institutions, which may lead to multiple processes of design. The overall effect of the design process depends on the interaction between multiple designers. In the local government context, there are deliberate attempts to involve local authorities as part of the institutional design process. For example, pilot projects initiated by the central government enable local authorities to experiment with different technologies and projects. The results of these projects are then disseminated to other local authorities and they become part of the national strategy. In that sense, the democratic renewal programme can be seen as a ‘scheme for designing institutions’ (Goodin, 1996) in which several designers at the local level contribute with the advantage of their local knowledge.

Promoting local variation

Institutional design should tolerate, even promote, variability so that local actors can build capacity for innovation and adaptation to changing circumstances (Lowndes and Wilson, 2003). Local conceptions are based neither on generalizable principles nor fixed standards, but rely on adaptive forms of practical reasoning that are more immediately accessible to the non-expert and are grounded in the values and collective experience of each community (Linder and Peters, 1995, p. 138). The emphasis here is not on the best designs in a technical sense but rather on the normative issues of appropriateness and meaningfulness. “The most appropriate design from this perspective will be those that best suit collective constructions of local purpose...and build on local experience and convey a sense of the community’s identity and moral order” (Linder and Peters, 1995, p. 143).

Timing

The timing of the design or other special circumstances may also support (or undermine) the design process. As Olsen (1997) remarks, “concepts like timely intervention, windows of opportunity, formative events and breaking points in history

suggest that there are time periods and situations where a confluence of events make design efforts more likely to succeed than in others” (p. 217). For example, a reform programme can introduce change more easily following a major transformation in political control or management because designs are more likely to be successful in relatively new arenas where there is a limited level of institutionalisation and more space for new designs to take hold.

Reactions to institutional design

Institutional design is not a one-way phenomenon. On the other side of the design there are actors (organisations and individuals). Although they may be reluctant to accept reforms at the beginning, they may not have much choice if there is a dependency situation. If they are statutorily dependent on the reforming side (e.g. local government to national government, nations to international laws) they have to comply. Moreover, compliance can bring various rewards such as access to funding, good relations with the reformers and immunity from further questioning and inspections.

Linking compliance with resource dependence, however, distracts attention from normative aspects of organisational behaviour. Organisations choose to comply not only because they need resources, but also because they think it is the right thing to do. They may comply even if there is no efficiency case for it. Adoption of certain structure can occur regardless of the existence of specific problems. They may be adopted if they have acquired social meanings. Offe (1996) suggests that designers are more likely to succeed if they copy institutional arrangements with a high status and good record elsewhere, or if they present designs as such copies rather than as instruments for achieving substantive goals. Imitation serves to play down conflicts and reduces the likelihood that designers will be suspected of favouring their own interests.

“Organisations which exist in highly elaborated institutional environments and succeed in becoming isomorphic with these environments gain the legitimacy and resources needed to survive” (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p. 352). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggest the term ‘institutional isomorphism’ to describe this process of homogenisation between organisations (p. 149).

Institutional isomorphism promotes the success and survival of organisations by incorporating externally legitimated structures (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p. 348). Institutional isomorphism may take place through coercive, mimetic and normative mechanisms. *Coercive* isomorphism results from both formal and informal pressures exerted on organisations by other organisations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society within which organisations function. Change may happen as a direct response to government mandate or common legal environment. Some of the changes may be largely ceremonial, but that does not mean they are inconsequential. Coercive isomorphism may be more subtle and less explicit. As a result of both these direct and indirect coercive mechanisms, “organisations are increasingly homogenous within given domains and increasingly organised around rituals of conformity to wider institutions” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 150).

Not all institutional isomorphism derives from coercive authority. Uncertainty is also a powerful force that encourages imitation (*mimetic* isomorphism). When goals are ambiguous or poorly understood, organisations may model themselves on other organisations. These organisations are perceived to be more legitimate and successful. The third mechanism, *normative* isomorphism, stems from professionalisation in organisations. The growth of professional networks and trade associations that span organisations are a vehicle for the definition and promulgation of normative rules about organisational and professional behaviour. They help in the diffusion of certain norms, values and structures. In the local government context, national umbrella organisations such as LGA, SOCITM, IDEA and professional associations such as SOLACE play an important role in isomorphic processes.

If design is not a one-way phenomenon and if actors (organisations and individuals) constitute one side of it, then individuals are not always paid enough consideration in the new institutionalist literature. This may be a reaction against behaviourist accounts that dominated the field for so long. In short, there is a need to understand the role of actors in institutional design and its success. The role of individuals was discussed under the structure-agency debate. However, there is also the collective dimension of reactions to design processes. Individual action does not preclude organisational or

collective attempts to manipulate, enact, challenge and reinterpret the demands generated by the design process. Organisations have alternative courses of action against the design process. Oliver (2001) contends that organisations have a degree of choice and activeness that enables them to exhibit a variety of strategic responses to institutional forces. Scott (1995) also notes that organisations can sometimes counter, curb, circumvent or redefine demands on themselves (p. 132). In the context of local government, for example, local authorities have a certain degree of discretion over how they implement new rules.

New institutions are often the outcomes of the recombination and rearrangement of existing institutional frameworks. Lanzara (1998) explains this by the desire for 'exploration' of new institutional arrangements and the desire for the 'exploitation' of current ones. Designers of new institutions experience the dilemma of allocating their scarce resources between these two alternatives. In order to balance the desire for innovation (exploration) with the desire for stability (exploitation), designers may choose modest mechanisms of change such as 'bricolage'. Lanzara (1998) explains bricolage as a strategy to exploit the features and properties of existing structures while at the same time to allow for a minimal amount of exploration and variability. From a rational choice perspective, it is desirable because it minimises costs by putting old components and structures to new functions and uses. From a sociological perspective, it helps designers to secure legitimacy because bricolage does not require sudden shifts in identities and meanings.

Processes of institutionalisation

Institutionalisation is not only a qualitative state; it is also important to develop tools that explain *processes* of institutionalisation (Tolbert and Zucker, 1999). Peters (1999b) also suggests that institutions become institutions; being an institution is a variable not a constant and not all are as fully institutionalised as others. Understanding institutionalisation as a process also helps in the development of tools for measuring the degree of institutionalisation and hence evaluating the success of institutional design initiatives.

Institutionalisation can be defined as the “process by which social processes, obligations or actualities come to take a rule like status in social thought and action” (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p. 341). So, how do we know that an institutional design process has succeeded in replacing old institutions and changing the rules of the game? A way of conceptualising institutionalisation may be as the “standardization of procedures and the routinization of practices within the organisation...So long as there is substantial internal variation there cannot be said to be an institution operative in the field” (Peters, 1999b, p. 16). However, institutionalisation is not something that happens overnight. Tolbert and Zucker (1999) develop a model demonstrating the stages of institutionalisation. These are habituation, objectification, and sedimentation.

Habituation refers to the “generation of new structural arrangements in response to a specific organisational problem and the formalisation of such arrangements in the policies and procedures of a given organisation or set of organisations that confront the same problems” (Tolbert and Zucker, 1999, p. 175). There might be simultaneous innovation since organisations share a common core of knowledge and ideas that make an innovation feasible. This simultaneity can also result from the pressure of an external force such as central government over local government. If there is new legislation demanding new procedures, local authorities may start to react at the same time. Imitation is common at this stage, but there is little sense of necessity of this among the actors since there is no consensus on the general utility of the innovation. Therefore, there are only a few adopters of a certain structure and there are variations between their implementations.

Objectification “involves some degree of social consensus among organisational decision makers concerning the value of a structure and the increasing adoption by organisations on the basis of that consensus” (Tolbert and Zucker, 1999, p. 176). Because other organisations have ‘tested’ the new structure, there is more knowledge of costs and benefits. The more widespread a given choice becomes, the more likely are individuals to view it as an optimal choice. This stage can be accelerated by ‘champions’ who have some interest in the promotion of the new structure. These

champions usually realise this by identifying a problem and then suggesting the new structure as the solution.

Sedimentation is “a process that fundamentally rests on the historical continuity of structure and especially on its survival across generations of organisational members” (Tolbert and Zucker, 1999, p. 178). It is characterised both by complete spread of the structure among all players (width) and by the perpetuation of the structure over a lengthy period of time (depth). However, sedimentation is not easy to achieve. There will be opposition to new structures among people who are adversely affected by them. In addition, a lack of demonstrable results associated with the structure makes it difficult to justify. Hence, Tolbert and Zucker (1999) note that “full institutionalisation of a structure is likely to depend on the conjoint effects of relatively low resistance by opposing groups, continued cultural support and promotion by advocacy groups and positive correlation with desired outcomes” (p. 178).

Observing these stages of institutionalisation requires long periods of time. This research does not aim to reach a conclusion about whether case study local authorities have succeeded in institutionalising new structures or not. Rather the purpose is to illuminate the institutionalisation process by using some of the concepts mentioned above such as imitation, external legitimisation, or champions.

This part has been concerned with the conceptualisation of institutional design. First, it addressed the issue of stability and change in institutional life in order to reveal whether there is scope for intentional institutional design. Then, the chapter developed a list of factors about when and how design efforts are likely to succeed and which principles should be applied in designing institutions. The role of actors as occupying the other end of the design process as well as being a part of that process was discussed. Finally, the stages of an institutionalisation process were introduced in order to highlight the dynamic nature of institutions. The next part links these concepts and issues with the purposes of this research and develops specific research propositions that will guide the empirical part of the project.

LINKING THE NEW INSTITUTIONALIST APPROACH WITH THE PURPOSES OF THE RESEARCH

The previous chapters developed a research agenda focusing on citizen participation and the use of the Internet for this purpose by local authorities. Chapter 4 suggested that the properties of the Internet are not given and that the Internet could be interpreted differently in different contexts. It also suggested that there is a need to develop theoretical tools to explain the incremental nature of change. At this point, the question is how institutional theory can be useful in the analysis of the research issues introduced in Chapter 1 and other issues that have arisen so far.

Institutions can be conceptualised both as a *context* and as a *process* for the purposes of this research. This suggests three research propositions:

- The attitudes towards the use of the Internet for participation purposes build on existing attitudes towards participation. The Internet's use is shaped within an *institutional context* and according to the existing operating procedures of local government. For this reason, its participatory potential depends not only on technical, but also on political limits. Therefore, it is expected that the use of the Internet will strengthen representative democracy and its associated institutions rather than enhancing alternative models of democracy.
- However, within this *context* (the stable dimension of institutions) there is also an ongoing intentional design *process* (the dynamic dimension of institutions). This design process aims to incorporate new institutions associated with electronic participation. Therefore, it is expected that there will be some developments towards new understandings and modes of participation. These developments may enhance alternative models of democracy.
- However, it is also likely that such design processes will be hampered by institutional factors arising from the internal settings of local authorities as well as from constraints of the wider environment within which local authorities are embedded. Therefore, it is anticipated that local authorities are still in the earlier

stages in terms of institutionalisation of new practices and rules associated with electronic participation. Linked to this, it is anticipated that developments towards alternative models of democracy would be limited at this stage.

Referring to an 'intentional' design process does not mean that the 'evolutionary' nature of institutional change is ignored. There may be important interactions between evolutionary and interventionist aspects of institutional change. To put it more specifically, there is an ongoing process in the local government context towards more involvement of citizens. Within this ongoing process, more recently, there has been an intentional effort to embed citizen participation in the working of local government, particularly regarding the use of the Internet. There may be significant interactions between these ongoing/evolutionary and intentional processes.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has introduced the new institutionalist approach in order to develop some tools that will guide the empirical part of the research. The value of this approach is that it enables an understanding of institutions as a context and as a process of design and institutionalisation.

Despite its adoption of an institutionalist approach, the research is concerned with the interaction between institutions and actors rather than merely analysing the impacts of institutions on actors. Institutional analysis provides the tools necessary to understand how actors' strategy in using the Internet is constrained and enabled by their institutional environment. Accordingly, the Internet's use is shaped within the existing operating procedures and values of local government, and its participatory potential depends not only on technical but also on political and institutional limits. Chapter 8 will investigate how the internal and wider institutional environments interact in developing strategies concerning the use of the Internet for participation purposes. By distinguishing between the wider and internal institutional contexts, it is possible to identify tendencies for homogenisation and variation among local authorities in terms of their strategies for using the Internet. The interaction between the wider and internal

institutional contexts leads to differing definitions of participation, differing understandings of the Internet and differing strategies in using the Internet for participation purposes. The empirical findings presented in Chapter 7 will analyse how given definitions in the literature and the objective properties of the Internet can be shaped differently in different contexts.

This chapter has also been engaged with the conceptualisation of institutional design in order to reveal whether there is scope for intentional institutional design. Using the tools developed in this chapter, Chapter 9 will analyse the constraints upon institutional design and reach conclusions on how the design of new institutions associated with electronic participation can be achieved. This chapter has also introduced the stages of an institutionalisation process in order to emphasise that institutions are not once-and-for-all creations. Using the tools developed in this chapter, Chapter 10 will analyse the degree to which the new institutions associated with electronic participation are institutionalised in a manner that could lead to changes in attitudes and behaviour.

Having developed the analytical framework of the research, the next chapter develops methodological tools for the empirical work.

CHAPTER 6

ANALYSING LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES: METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to develop a methodological framework for analysing the development of local authorities' strategy concerning the use of the Internet for citizen participation. The research propositions presented in the previous chapter provided the point of reference when constructing the framework for data collection and analysis. The research is based on a qualitative approach in data collection and analysis particularly because of its "concern with meanings and the way people understand things" (Denscombe, 2003). The assumption behind this study is that the Internet is being shaped in different ways in different institutional contexts. Hence, it is important to focus on the ways in which actors within local authorities perceive the Internet and the ways in which their attitudes towards participation are institutionally shaped. Rather than taking the properties of the Internet as 'given', the research explores how the properties of the Internet and how the issues surrounding political participation are *made sense of* by actors within local authorities. As Denzin (1998) notes "Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena *in terms of the meanings people bring to them*" (emphasis added, p. 3). It provides the 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) that is necessary to explain the complexity of social life.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first concentrates on the research strategy and rationale. This involves discussing the case selection process and providing a brief description of the three local authorities. The second discusses the data collection methods. The third focuses on data analysis. The final section discusses the epistemological underpinnings and boundaries of the framework. Collectively, these four sections provide an overview of the research approach and its limitations. This offers a basis for the collection and analysis of the empirical findings, which will be discussed in the subsequent four chapters.

RESEARCH STRATEGY AND RATIONALE

Case study approach

The research design is based on a 'case study' approach. Case study research is a form of empirical inquiry, which investigates phenomena using a number of methods and which is concerned with the in-depth analysis of a complex situation. It has exploratory, descriptive and explanatory purposes (Yin, 2003, p. 1). It explores a phenomenon in a holistic sense; it describes the phenomenon in its natural setting. So, how can it contribute to explaining the development of local authorities' strategy in relation to the use of the Internet? The research questions developed in the previous chapters suggest a complex set of institutional constraints and opportunities within which such strategies develop. This requires a deep and careful examination of those institutional contexts. The research is concerned with investigating the electronic democracy strategy of local authorities from a holistic perspective in order to identify as many factors as possible that contribute to the development of strategy. The case study strategy has been chosen because it allows for a deep and holistic understanding that a survey approach cannot provide.

This research investigates the *process* of developing an electronic participation strategy, which in turn necessitates a close examination of the *real life* context. The purpose is to understand and explain a process rather than to find a statistically significant relation between clearly identified variables (which is often in the aim of survey approaches). As will be discussed in the analysis chapters later, the institutional context of local authorities is very complex characterised by internal dynamics, political complexities, stable and changing patterns of behaviour and formal and informal rules. In this sense, the main benefit of using a case study approach is that, by focusing on a few instances (in the case of these research, three case study local authorities), the researcher is able to deal with the subtleties and intricacies of a complex social situation (Denscombe, 2003).

Adopting a case study approach does not commit the researcher to the view that alternative approaches (mainly survey) cannot shed light upon the phenomenon under investigation. On the contrary, a survey approach might have produced *wide and*

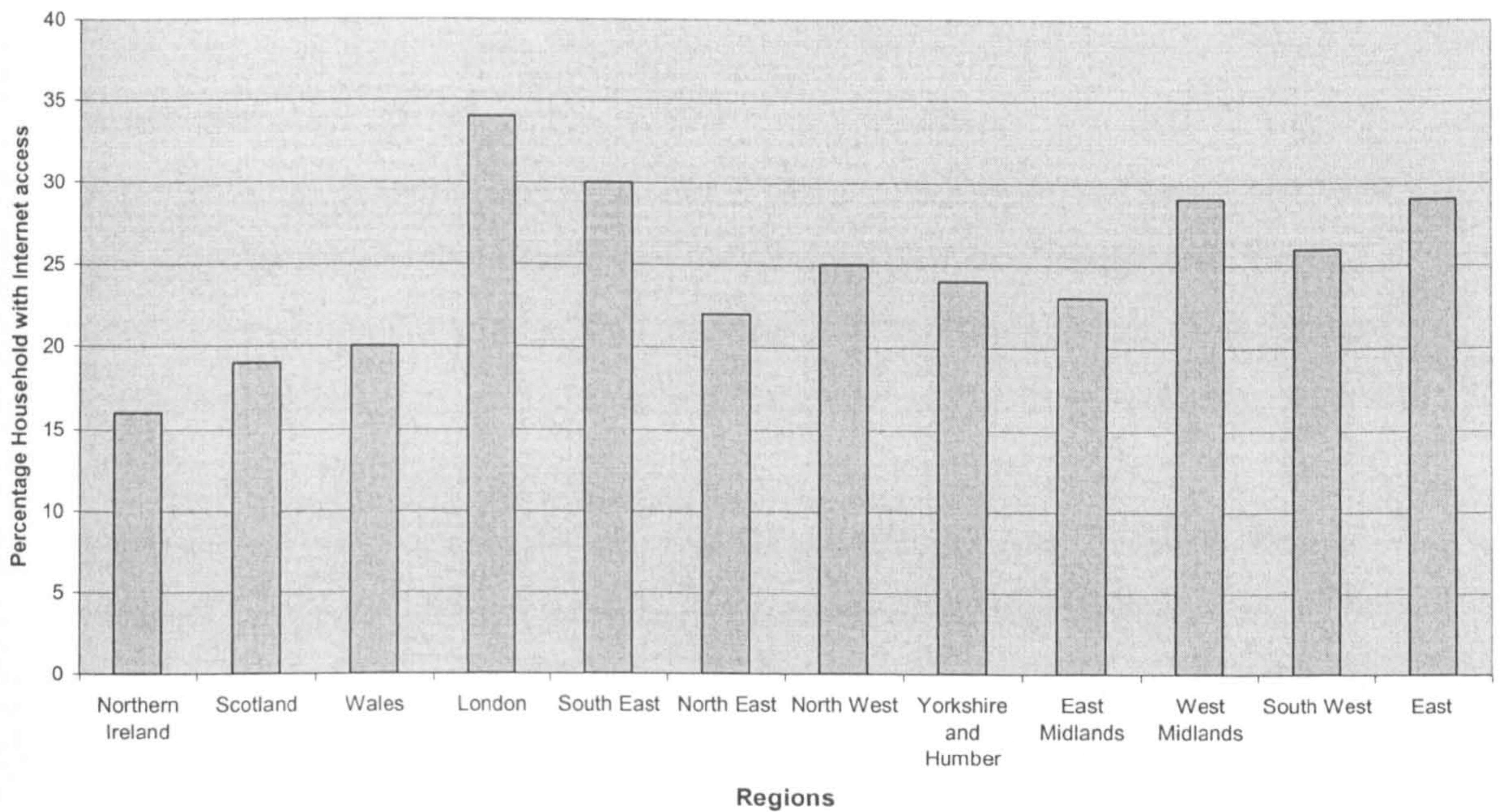
inclusive coverage of the developments regarding the local authorities' strategy in using the Internet. However, although such an approach has the advantage in terms of the *breadth* of knowledge that is produced, it is disadvantaged in terms of the *depth* of that knowledge. Case studies can investigate social phenomenon in much more detail than survey studies. By focusing on a few instances, the case study researcher may gain insights that can have wider implications and, more importantly, that would not have come to light through the use of a survey approach (Denscombe, 2003).

Case studies may be based on a single-case or multiple-case design (Yin, 2003, Ch. 2). This study is based on a multiple-case design. Yin (2003) suggests that multiple case designs are preferred because of the possibility of replication of the findings, which allows a higher degree of external generalisability. In this research, the research propositions required that more than one case be studied. The research propositions developed earlier suggest that attitudes towards electronic participation are built upon existing attitudes towards participation and shaped by the opportunities and constraints of the institutional context. Hence, it was important to have more than one case in order to investigate how different institutional contexts may lead to different strategies in terms of using the Internet for participation purposes. However, this is not necessarily a comparative study in the sense that it does not merely focus on comparing and contrasting cases. The purpose is rather to test the relevance of theoretical propositions in different contexts.

Case selection

The empirical study is based on three case studies in order to highlight differences and similarities between different institutional contexts and their implications for electronic participation policies. The constraints on the scale of the study suggested a focus on the East Midlands. Focusing on the East Midlands also enabled the researcher to avoid the overrepresentation of extreme cases such as the regions with highest or lowest Internet access levels as the chart below shows (e.g. London and the South East or Northern Ireland and Wales). The implications of this decision will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter when the issue of 'generalisability' is considered.

Figure 6.1: Household Internet Access by region, September 2000, National Statistics



Source: National Statistics, UK

Cases were identified according to three main criteria. First, it was decided that the three localities should have a certain level of economic wellbeing so as to ensure that there would be at least some Internet access. It would have been difficult to study electronic participation in the most deprived places where people lack access to the Internet. Ideally, an index of Internet access by locality was required in order to eliminate the most deprived localities with lowest access, but there was no such index available. However, there was sufficient evidence to assume that Internet access is highly related to socio-economic status (National Statistics, 2001, Foley 2000). Therefore, the deprivation index of the DETR, (2000) which included indicators of income, employment, education and skills and access to social services was used. In this index, the most deprived localities (the bottom third) were eliminated.

Secondly, it was decided that all localities should display a certain level of 'civicness' in order to ensure that any reluctance on the part of the local authority to utilise the Internet did not stem from a lack of demand from citizens for participation. For

measuring the level of civicness, the National League Table of the ESRC Locality Effect project¹¹, which included indicators of electoral turnout, volunteering and lottery applications, was used. Again, the lowest third of the localities were eliminated from the selection process.

The third criterion was the selection of only second-tier local authorities. County councils were excluded because they are more remote from citizens' lives than are second-tier councils. They are also so big that there may be large variations within the same county especially between town centres and rural parts in terms of levels of Internet access and civicness. Parish councils are also excluded because, although they are close to people's lives, they are too small to have sufficient power, responsibility and the kind of budget necessary to implement electronic democracy. District councils, on the other hand, are close enough to citizens and have sufficient power and responsibility to make electronic democracy possible and meaningful.

The study therefore required district councils in the East Midlands with a certain level of socio-economic status and a certain level of civicness. The following table shows the selected cases and provides information on the levels of deprivation and civicness in the three cases.

Table 6.1: Case selection criteria

<i>Cases</i>	<i>Deprivation Index 2000 (Out of 354 districts)</i>	<i>Level of Civicness (Out of 24 points)</i>
Harborough DC	346	16.00
Oadby and Wigston BC	240	14.00
Wellingborough BC	151	17.00

As the table shows, three cases were selected after eliminating the lowest thirds in terms of levels of deprivation and civicness. Among the three cases, Harborough is the least deprived area (346th) while Wellingborough is the most deprived (151st). In terms of

¹¹ The project seeks to explain variation in levels of local political participation beyond that explained by socio-economic factors. The project is based on a data set of scores in all English local authorities for a-democratic innovation by local authority and b- social capital in the society.

level of civicness, they are similar to each other and Wellingborough has a slightly more active citizenry (with 17.00 points).

In addition to the objective criteria described above, some specific factors supported the selection of the three local authorities. Harborough was awarded a Pathfinder scheme together with another four local councils to experiment with the concept of 'community portal'. The concept of community portal is based upon online service delivery and the enhancement of democracy, especially through online discussion forums. Hence, it was an interesting case both to highlight the impact of the partnership dimension and the impact of government funding upon the development of an electronic democracy strategy. Oadby and Wigston was an interesting case especially in terms of highlighting the characteristics of a small authority regarding both budget and geography.

Wellingborough had a vibrant community in terms of voluntary organisations and existence of minority ethnic groups. It was also the most deprived locality of the three cases, which suggested that there might be issues of digital divide and social exclusion in relation to the use of the Internet by the local council. One of the cases was initially chosen as a pilot study for familiarisation with the local government environment, gaining interviewing skills and testing the interview schedules. However, it was then included in the research since no problem was encountered during the process.

Object of analysis: Case study outlines

Before discussing the data collection methods, a description of the particular case studies is necessary. Here, 'case study' refers to each local authority as a whole.

Although some departments and individuals within local authorities may be more involved in designing and implementing e-democracy strategies, the research adopts a holistic approach. The purpose of a holistic approach is to consider the whole context of the developments regarding electronic participation and, where possible, this has been done even though the focus has had to be on certain individuals, documents, departments and issues related to the e-democracy strategies. The following boxes provide some background information on each case.

BOX 6.1: Harborough District Council

This very large rural district council spreads over 260sqmiles. It is one of the most affluent localities in the whole country, and has a population of 77, 500. It consists of two town centres (Market Harborough and Lutterworth) and various villages dispersed in a very large area. Despite the level of affluence, access to services and communication with the council has been a problem because of its rural nature. There are some villages that have very limited access to the council services. The level of affluence has been an obstacle for getting government funds for a long time. Although the locality was a wealthy area, the council could not access large government funds. The council established the Welland Partnership with four other rural councils in order to find solutions to similar problems and put in joint bids for government funding. As a result, the council succeeded in securing funds for a Pathfinder project, which aimed to build electronic delivery of services and citizen participation through community portals. The whole e-government and e-democracy agenda in Harborough DC has been driven by the Welland Partnership. Internet access levels are above the national average. The council has been a hung council in terms of political control between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. The Leader and a further 5 out of 9 members of the Executive was Conservative. Innovation was the most frequently emphasised value throughout the interviews.

BOX 6.2: Borough Council of Wellingborough

This is a borough council with a population of 68,000. It is not as wealthy as Harborough due particularly to the existence of some pockets of significant deprivation. There are also problems of declining industries. There is a substantial level of minority ethnic communities, especially African-Caribbean households. The council has a large housing stock and a significant portion of the population consists of ex-Londoners who have moved to the borough. In 1997 the council went through a political control change from Conservatives to Labour, which was followed by a management change. The council had an inward looking style both in terms of partnership working with other agencies and in terms of citizen participation. In order to reverse this, the new political and management leaders established a Community and Cultural Development Department, which had never existed before. Partnership and leadership were the most frequently emphasised values throughout the interviews.

BOX 6.3: Oadby and Wigston Borough Council

This is one of the smallest councils in England in terms of population (54,000), geographical size (9sqmiles) and budget (£5 million). The council consists of three main areas with different levels of affluence as well as civicness. It is proud to have close and face-to-face relations with the residents and perceives this as its biggest strength. The council was Conservative controlled for a long time. In 1991, the Liberals took control on the strength of a campaign emphasising consultation and a willingness to break from the past attitude. The most frequently emphasised values throughout the interviews were those of closeness to citizens and being a small and listening council.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The research drew on different methods and sources of data. However, these methods have not been used simply as a means of triangulation in the sense that one part of the study was employed to check the validity of the other. Rather, different methods aimed to yield data on different aspects of the whole picture. Three methods of data collection were used: interviews, website analysis and documentary analysis.

Interviews

Rationale for interviews

Interviewing is a way of asking people directly about what is going on in their life. Hence, it is an obvious short cut in seeking answers to research questions. However, there are a number of criticisms of interviews, the most important of which is 'bias' which can be from the interviewee, the researcher or both. Interviewing is a social interaction and the nature of the interaction may affect how questions are both asked and answered. From the researcher, a potential problem is that of asking leading questions. However, it is possible that leading questions may legitimately be used to check the reliability of answers. Therefore, as Kvale (1996) suggests, it is important to consider "where the questions do lead and whether they lead in important directions that yield new and worthwhile knowledge" (p. 287).

On the interviewee side, the issue of bias is primarily related to the problem of ensuring that the respondent is telling the truth. As Dean and Whyte (1958) note:

The informant's statement represents merely the perception of the informant, filtered and modified by his cognitive and emotional reactions and reported through his personal verbal usages... We are getting merely the informant's picture of the world as he sees it. And we are getting it only as he is willing to pass it on to us in this particular interview situation (p. 34).

From a practical point of view, there are certain strategies with which to address this problem. For example, the researcher may use other methods to validate the responses, ask leading questions to check the reliability of previous answers, and check with other respondents. From a theoretical perspective, the idea of finding out the 'truth' is more problematic. It reflects a social realist ontology that prioritises objective reality over socially constructed meanings and experiences. The ontological and epistemological underpinning of the research is discussed in the 'limitations' section. Here, it will suffice to say that the research follows Kvale (1996) concerning the role of interviews. He notes:

The very strength of the interview is its privileged access to the common understanding of subjects, the understandings that provides their worldview and the basis for their actions... the personal perspectives of the subjects and the interpreter can provide a distinctive and sensitive understanding of the phenomena of the everyday life world (p. 291).

Hence, in this research, interviews were not intended as a way of locating absolute truths. Their purpose was rather to understand the perceptions of actors and the degree to which they were enabled and constrained by their institutional environment.

The interviews

Interviews, which were the primary source of empirical material, were conducted in three local authorities during the period from October 2002 to May 2003. Forty-two semi-structured interviews with officers and elected members were conducted¹². Semi structured interviews enable the researcher both to have a clear list of issues to be

¹² List of interviews can be found in Appendix 2. Interview schedule can be found in Appendix 3.

addressed and to be flexible in terms of the order in which the topics are considered. More importantly, this method enables the researcher to let the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on the relevant issues (Denscombe, 2003).

The interviewees were selected in relation to their formal role. Officers who were involved in citizen participation, such as those in community development departments or members of consultation teams and tenant participation workers, were of primary interest. Similarly, officers who were primarily involved in the development of IT strategies and their implementation, such as officer e-champions, IT managers and webmasters, were interviewed. E-government is a strategic issue that is coordinated at a high level. Therefore, chief executives and relevant directors were also interviewed. However, reliance on their account of the development ran the risk of 'key informant bias' (Maxwell, 1996, p. 73). This was avoided by interviewing lower level members of staff who were less involved in such issues such as press and public relations officers and Best Value officers. On the elected member side, leaders of the council and member e-champions were interviewed. In order to balance views, members were selected from different political parties¹³.

Interviews were conducted face to face and individually except on two occasions where two people were interviewed together following their request to do so. Interviews took between 40 and 70 minutes and all were tape-recorded following the consent of the interviewees¹⁴. Interviews were transcribed as quickly as possible in order to combine the transcriptions with field notes and other impressions. Transcribing the interviews provided an invaluable benefit in drawing common themes and reaching conclusions. Interviews were analysed following a 'contextualising strategy' (Maxwell, 1996, p. 79), rather than coding the specific features, in order to understand the data in context.

¹³ Only in Oadby and Wigston was this impossible partly because there were only five opposition members and they were not available to be interviewed. Instead, I interviewed a member from the scrutiny panel on the grounds that he would be more inclined to criticize the executive decisions.

¹⁴ Interview consent form can be found in Appendix 1.

Website analysis

Rationale and framework for website analysis

Although interviews provide valuable information about the perceptions and attitudes of the local government actors, they do not provide enough evidence about how local authorities are actually using the Internet. Analysing the websites enables the researcher to reveal the extent to which local authorities' attitudes towards the Internet come into practice. Although the analysis of media sources and political documents has a long tradition (Berelson, 1952; Holsti, 1969), analysis of websites is a recent area of study within various disciplines. The research interests and specific research questions have differed across disciplines and depending on the purposes of the study. However, many of them start from the properties of the Internet and ask whether the examined websites exploit these properties or not. For example, Gibson and Ward (2000), in their analysis of political party websites, first identify the properties of the Internet and then ask “*given* these distinctive properties, what are the particular ways in which we would expect parties to be using the WWW (emphasis added, p. 304)?” This leads to a technology-led evaluation of websites. As explained in Chapter 3, taking the properties of the Internet as ‘given’ is a form of technological determinism. Instead, this research asks the following: “given the importance of participation and the role of elected local government to engender participation, how do local authorities use the Internet for participation purposes?” In other words, the methodological framework that is used to analyse the websites develops from the conceptual framework that has been constructed in the previous chapters which centres on participation.

Accordingly, the main interest is to evaluate the capacity of the websites to provide opportunities for citizen participation. Also considered is the extent to which the websites provide information about the working of the local democratic system, such as information on elections, councillors, political management and so on. The framework also evaluates their accessibility by looking at features such as text-only information. This is important in terms of ensuring equality of access and avoiding exclusion of particular groups. A full list of analysis criteria is attached in Appendix 5.

The analysis was based on a qualitative approach. Initial website analyses were descriptive and anecdotal but new studies have taken a more systematic approach. This requires identification of indicators to measure various aspects of websites such as ease of use, information content, and interactivity (Gibson and Ward, 2000; Musso et al, 2000). However, it is also useful to describe the 'feel' of the website by providing some qualitative information from a user's perspective. Although quantitative studies allow for systematic analyses of political sites, they are limited in their ability to show and, more importantly, explain the complexities and variations. Qualitative analyses, on the other hand, are useful in providing rich and contextual information, but they are limited in the extent to which they allow for identification of trends across time and different cases. In short, the analysis framework was based on predefined criteria in relation to three categories: participation and consultation, local democracy, usability and accessibility.

The analysis

According to the Tagish directory of local government websites¹⁵, by 2001 there were 463 official websites for county, metropolitan, unitary, borough and district councils (excluding secondary sites). This number had increased to 483 by January 2004. In addition to official websites, some local authorities developed additional portals to address a specific segment of the population. As part of the Pathfinder project, Harborough initiated two community portals, which were constructed for two town centres: Market Harborough and Lutterworth. Similarly, Oadby and Wigston launched a specific portal for the youth. This raised questions about which websites should be analysed. The website analysis focused on the official websites and the two community portals in Harborough. Hence, the following websites were included in the analysis:

www.harborough.gov.uk

www.marketharboroughonline.co.uk

www.lutterworth-online.co.uk

www.oadby-wigston.gov.uk

www.wellingborough.gov.uk

¹⁵ Source <http://www.tagish.co.uk/links/localgov.htm>, accessed at October 2001 and January 2004.

The official website and the community portals in Harborough were linked to each other. For example, when you click on 'services' on one of the community portals, a new window (the official website) would open. Hence, it was almost impossible to distinguish these three websites and therefore the analysis was conducted jointly. In other words, when a specific question was asked such as whether there is an online poll on the website, I looked at both community portals and the official website.

In Oadby and Wigston, there was a youth portal in addition to the main website, but it was not analysed because the content of the website was very limited. It was mostly used to convey health messages to young people and to create a community feeling. The interviews revealed that the council did not take it as seriously as in Harborough. Moreover, during the period of the research the website has not been visited once.

Websites are updated frequently, and this can mean that sometimes content is removed within hours of being added. Therefore, the analysis should be made within a short period. However, this could lead to overlooking various circumstantial factors. To avoid these problems, the analysis was conducted within a single day on two different dates (21 March 2003 and 22 October 2003). In this way, it was also possible to note any progress in terms of their participation potential.

The website analysis by itself cannot reveal whether the responses are actually taken into consideration by the council. In order to test whether the electronic services offered on the website were actually provided, I completed an online application form on one of the websites to receive a leaflet, but never received anything. Moreover, the effectiveness of the websites depends on the people who use them. The research did not examine the extent to which citizens had been using the council websites. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the results of the website analysis in conjunction with data collected through other methods. The interviews helped overcome some of the limitations. For example, they provided evidence about the response rates of the electronic participation initiatives (see analysis chapters).

Documentary Analysis

Silverman (2001) notes that social scientists have made very little use of texts for their research despite the fact that text provides rich, naturally occurring accessible data, which have real effects in the world. Yin (2003) also suggests that documents are important “to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (p. 87). In this study, one document is of particular interest - the local authorities’ Implementing Electronic Government Statement (or IEG). This is the official strategy document in relation to e-government. The document also provides the basis on which government funding is distributed to local authorities. During the course of the research, local authorities prepared two rounds of statements in 2001 and 2002, both of which are analysed.

This source of data was expected to reveal different aspects of reality. Since the documents were prepared for central government, it was expected that they might have different emphases from data collected through interviews where actors were talking to an academic researcher rather than addressing the government. The purpose of this analysis was to reveal formal accounts of how local authorities express themselves. It was anticipated that there might be inconsistencies between the data obtained through interviews and documentary analysis. However, this does not necessarily indicate a problem with validity. On the contrary, the conceptual framework adopted in the research highlights inconsistencies between formal and informal accounts as part of institutional life.

A common method for analysing documents has been ‘content analysis’, which is based on the creation of categories and the analysis of the documents according to those categories often by using computer software. It provides a means for quantifying the contents of a text by using an ‘objective’ and repeatable method. Although it connotes a ‘scientific’ approach to documentary analysis, the research did not rely on this analysis approach for three reasons. First, claiming that content analysis is an objective approach is constrained because it is the researcher who decides how to create categories and which words to assign in each category. Second, content analysis has a tendency to dislocate the units and their meaning from the context (Denscombe, 2003). Third, it is

an extremely time-consuming method and was not an efficient use of the time available. Therefore, the contribution of documents to this research has been their overall value in enabling the researcher to cross-check data, to make inferences and to highlight discrepancies with informal accounts.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis is the process that brings order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). As mentioned above, this study is based on a qualitative approach. Qualitative analysis is a process of interpretation. Throughout this process, the researcher interprets the data according to background, ideology, and beliefs. This raises questions in relation to how scientific and objective the research process is. The collected data does not speak for itself; it is the researcher who makes sense of it. Therefore, the researcher must address the details of the analysis process so that the reader knows how the raw data is interpreted to create an account of reality.

The analysis process

Yin (2003) suggests five specific techniques for analysing case studies: pattern matching, explanation building, time series, logic models and cross-case synthesis (p. 109). This research relied mainly on an explanation building technique although some elements of cross case synthesis have been used. Yin (2003) notes that explanation building is likely to be a result of a series of iterations where initial theoretical propositions are compared with initial findings and revised, probably several times, as data from all cases is collected. In this sense, the final explanation may not have been fully stipulated at the beginning of the study.

Following this technique, an initial analysis was made halfway through the data collection. In addition to avoiding the accumulation of large volumes of unanalysed data, it also enabled the researcher progressively to gain 'theoretical sensitivity' (Glaser, 1978 cited in Maxwell, 1996, p. 77). This was achieved by organising the data in such a way as to generate categories, themes and issues that were both informed by the

literature review and grounded in the collected data. The general approach to data analysis has been an iterative one in the sense that there has been interaction between theory and evidence throughout the research process. The research propositions have informed the data collection and analysis stages but also have been refined as a result of those processes.

Huberman and Miles (1998) suggest that data analysis comprises data reduction, data displays and conclusion drawing/verifying. In order to follow this process, I first familiarised myself with the data by reading all of the IEG documents and interview transcripts. The reading process was informed by some concepts and themes that had been developed before. In addition to these, the collected data introduced new concepts and themes. At the end of familiarisation stage, a list of themes emerged from both the literature review and the collected data. Generation of concepts was achieved by focusing on repetitions, contradictions and unexpected comments. In addition, identifying similarities and differences between the three cases and comparing responses from respondents with similar/different roles such as officers versus councillors helped in generating concepts and themes (see for example Chapter 7 and 9).

To take an example, one such theme was the suggestion that the use of the Internet for participation leads to further social exclusion. This theme was repeatedly raised by several respondents. In order to analyse this theme, a Word document on social exclusion was created and all data relevant to social exclusion, such as direct quotations from interviews and IEGs or indirect interpretations, was cut and pasted into this document. This enabled data reduction. This document was then examined more closely to understand what kinds of exclusion issues were highlighted, by whom and in which locations. In this way, I was able to produce tables comparing the respective approaches of the three cases to the problem of social exclusion (data displays).

A data display, is defined by Huberman and Miles (1998) as “an organised, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing” (p. 180). They are useful in making comparisons and contrasts, noting patterns and themes, clustering, following up

surprises and so on (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The displays helped to identify themes that cut across cases or that are peculiar to certain cases. In using such displays the descriptive part of the analysis contributed to the identification of some common themes such as arguments against participation or tensions between different models of democracy (see Chapter 7). In places, a cross-case synthesis technique was used. Tables were created to capture findings from different cases. They enabled comparison and contrast between the three cases in terms of their motivations for consultation or the specific applications of the Internet that each prefers to use (see for example Chapter 7).

EPISTEMOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE FRAMEWORK

So far, the chapter has summarised the methods of data collection and analysis. These methods were chosen because they were considered appropriate for the specific goals of the research. However, the choice of methods is also related to different ways of understanding the social world. The use of methods is often associated with an epistemological position about the production of knowledge (Marsh and Furlong, 2002). Devine (2002) argues that “qualitative methods have been aligned with an interpretive epistemology that stresses the dynamic, constructed, and evolving nature of social reality” (p. 201). However, this does not mean that the choice of qualitative methods in this research stems necessarily from an interpretivist epistemology.

In terms of epistemological stance, the research follows ‘critical realism’, which has been significantly influenced by the interpretivist critique (Marsh and Furlong, 2002, p. 31). This approach acknowledges two points. “First, while social phenomena exist independently of our interpretation of them, our interpretation and understanding of them affect outcomes” (p. 31). In accordance with this point, the chapter on institutionalism showed that social science involves the study of the interaction between structure and agency and suggested that reflexive agents are able to interpret and change structures. Second, Marsh and Furlong (2002) contend that our knowledge of the world is fallible and theory laden. In the data analysis section, I explained that the analysis process has been informed by the concepts and themes that had been developed before

in the literature review stages (although additional themes emerged during data collection). Therefore, the findings were inevitably theory laden.

So, what are the methodological implications of this epistemological position? This position suggests that there *is* a real world, but emphasises that outcomes are shaped by the way in which that world is socially constructed. As such, both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used. In line with many social and political studies, this research combined a variety of methods. For example, interviewing was chosen as a way of understanding the perceptions of electronic participation and to explain how these perceptions and attitudes were constructed within an institutional context. Website analysis, on the other hand, was chosen to reveal the extent to which the Internet is actually used for participation purposes. Therefore, it involved an element of researching objective reality. However, when combined with the interviews, the main purpose was to understand how the website was perceived and socially constructed. The approach of this research to technological development also reflects this critical realist stance. Chapter 4 argued that although the Internet introduces change through its technical properties that are ‘real’, change also occurs as a result of a constructed narrative that surrounds the Internet. This narrative emphasises concepts such as ‘efficiency’ and the ‘modern’, values that local authorities are eager to promote.

It has almost become a norm, especially for the authors of PhD theses to address the issues of validity, reliability and generalisability. However, what is striking is that the major sources of reference, such as Robert Yin’s *Case Study Research* (2003), do not refer to epistemological issues when deciding what is good and what is bad research. Any prescribed criteria from a positivist perspective may have no meaning and relevance for an interpretivist who by definition believes that there can be competing interpretations of the same data.

In short, it is important to consider the epistemological approach of the research because it helps in understanding the biases and limitations of the research. It also provides a larger perspective in deciding what constitutes good and bad research. The following

evaluation of validity, reliability and generalisability will be made bearing these issues in mind.

Validity

Silverman (2001) suggests three criteria relevant to the assessment of the validity of research: the impact of the researcher on the setting, the values of the researcher, and the truth status of a respondent's account (p. 233). Some of these issues were discussed above under 'interviews'. Here it is sufficient to say that bias is an integral part of qualitative research and, instead of trying to disguise it, bias should be acknowledged. In the case of this research, the researcher's identity as an overseas female student might have been encouraging for the respondents, as they would be less likely to feel threatened by her presence.

A commonly suggested way of achieving validity is the use of different methods of data collection. Again, this presumes that different methods would enable finding out the objective reality. In this research, multiple methods have been used, more as an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of different aspects of the phenomenon in question than as a tool of validation. In some cases, these methods revealed contradictory findings. For example, the IEG documents prepared for the government provided data that was inconsistent with the data collected through the interviews. Is this a sign of lack of validity? From a new institutionalist perspective, such inconsistencies between formal and informal accounts are to be anticipated. Therefore, finding such inconsistencies is not only compatible with the epistemological stance, but also supports the new institutionalist framework.

According to Maxwell (1996), another way to increase validity is to get feedback from a variety of people who are familiar with the phenomena or settings that the researcher is studying. This was done especially for one of the cases where a colleague had been extensively involved in relation to another piece of research. Validity is also concerned with considering all influences on the studied phenomenon. Yin (2003) suggests that the investigator should try to determine whether event *x* led to event *y* or whether there may

have been a third factor (*z*) which could actually have caused event *y*. Since the research has not been intended to establish causal relations between well-defined variables, this has not been a major concern. However, in trying to understand the interaction between institutions and the development of e-participation strategies, alternative explanations have been considered (for more detailed discussion, see Conclusions chapter).

Reliability

Reliability refers to the requirement that “if a later investigator followed the same procedures as described by an earlier investigator and conducted the same case study all over again, the later investigator should arrive at the same findings and conclusions” (Yin, 2003, p. 37). The ultimate purpose is to minimise the errors and biases in the research. The best way to achieve this is by documenting all procedures of the research as much as possible. In this research, this was done at both the data collection and analysis stages. Regarding data collection, I provided the sampling criteria for interviews (see ‘interviews’ above). Interviews were conducted according to an interview schedule that set out the questions to be asked. Although the content changed depending on the locations and the roles of the respondents, the schedule provided a framework that could be used by another researcher and possibly to reach similar findings. The website analysis was also conducted according to a pre-defined framework, which could be used in the same way to generate similar findings. Regarding the analysis process, as many details as possible have been provided in order to increase transparency.

Although every effort has been made to increase the reliability of the research, certain limits have to be acknowledged. For example, even if another researcher uses the same interview schedule to interview the same people, he or she may not get the same answers. It is likely that the identity (gender, age, so on) and attitude (formal, informal, assertive, and so on) of the researcher affects the respondent and his/her answers. Therefore, differences would start occurring even at the data collection stage. The

impact of the researcher's identity would become even more important during the analysis stage, which is inherently about *interpretation* of data.

Generalisability

The case study approach is often dismissed because it is difficult to generalise the findings from a small number of particular settings. Yin (2003) notes that such criticisms implicitly contrast the case study approach with survey research in which a sample generalises to a larger universe. He suggests that case studies, unlike statistical samples, are generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to populations. They are used to expand and generalise theories (analytic generalisation), not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalisation).

Epistemologically, generalisability originates from a positivist concern about obtaining general rules. Social scientists can choose to highlight the uniqueness of their cases rather than trying to prove how representative they are. In this research, the inclusion of three cases was not motivated by any concern to increase the degree of generalisability (statistical). Rather, the purpose was to improve the robustness of theoretical findings. Moreover, having more than one case was necessary so that the impact of different institutional contexts on e-participation strategies could be demonstrated. Nevertheless, the representativeness of case studies is an important issue that requires attention. The first level of representativeness is concerned with the extent to which the selected cases are similar to other local authorities. It is possible to look at some facts in relation to the geographic and demographic conditions of the cases. All cases were second tier authorities in the East Midlands with similar populations but different urban/rural structures, political control and geographical size. Viewed along these dimensions, the cases are not wholly representative of local government in Britain. However, there are still many local authorities that do share these characteristics. Moreover, it may be the case that there is no such representative local authority or even set of authorities. Stanyer (1976) argues that all local authorities are miniature political systems in their own right, each of which has its own unique features and processes. If his argument is right then it is impossible to find such representative authorities.

In order to enable the readers to make a judgement about the representativeness of cases, I provided some information above in relation to 'case outlines'. The cases are all selected from the East Midlands, but there is no obvious reason not to believe that the results apply to other regions. This is called 'face generalisability' by Maxwell (1996, p. 97). However, in terms of Internet access, the East Midlands region has low access levels. Other local authorities with higher Internet penetration may offer more e-participation tools both because they have fewer worries about the 'digital divide' and because there may be more demand from citizens for an online council. In fact, many studies comparing different localities in terms of Internet use by political parties, MPs or councillors found that London and the Southeast are ahead of others (see for example, Uhm Seung-Yong and Hague, 2001). Another important limitation is related to the exclusion of county councils. A research project focusing on county councils may reveal that these councils have more resources to invest in e-participation tools. For example, the DETR 1998 and ODPM 2002 reports show that county councils are more likely to develop websites since they have greater resources. However, this is likely to change now that having a website has become almost a norm for local authorities (see Chapter 9). Moreover, as this research demonstrates, barriers to implementing e-participation usually stem from institutional factors, although having resources is also important (see Chapters 7-10).

The second level of representativeness is concerned with the extent to which the development of the strategies within the three cases in relation to using the Internet can be generalised to other authorities. Harborough, for example, was selected as a case study because of its Pathfinder status and in relation to the potential of this innovative institutional arrangement. The whole e-government agenda is driven by a partnership agreement. This probably limits the generalisability of its findings. However, it was expected that this case could provide important findings in terms of the impact of being a Pathfinder authority and having government funding. Therefore, there was an element of 'purposeful sampling' (Maxwell, 1996, p. 70) in order to highlight the role of resources and innovation during the institutional design process (see Chapter 9). Oadby and Wigston, on the other hand, was a very small authority and it was expected that it could provide important insights about the tension between the properties of the Internet

and local participation (see Chapters 3 and 10). In short, the cases may not be generalisable to the whole universe of local authorities, but their theoretical findings can be expanded to other cases.

CONCLUSIONS

In drawing a methodological framework for analysing local government strategies for using the Internet for participation purposes, this chapter has provided the basis for operationalising the theoretical propositions developed in earlier chapters. It has outlined the case study approach and its rationale. It has also provided the details of three different methods of data collection. In clarifying the epistemological underpinnings of the methods, it has sought to enable the reader to evaluate the boundaries and limitations of the research. The following chapters will analyse the empirical findings that the application of this framework has revealed.

CHAPTER 7

FINDINGS FROM THE CASE STUDIES: PERCEPTIONS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION, THE INTERNET AND ELECTRONIC PARTICIPATION

INTRODUCTION

This is the first of four chapters analysing the strategies of the three elected local authorities in relation to the use of the Internet for enhancing participation. It is concerned with understanding the perceptions of and attitudes towards participation in general and the use of the Internet for this purpose in particular. Chapter 2 noted that participation has been defined and justified in different ways in academic debates. It also identified varieties of participation methods as well as some possible normative and practical concerns around participation. This chapter looks at the ways in which participation is defined, perceived and actually implemented by policy actors in the local government. The overall purpose of the chapter is to provide an understanding of their strategy in relation to participation and the use of the Internet for participation purposes. The subsequent three chapters analyse in more detail how this strategy develops within an institutional environment. This chapter applies the themes and issues that have been developed in the first chapters of the thesis (Chapters 2, 3, and 4) and investigates the extent to which they are relevant in the case studies. The subsequent three chapters use the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 5 in order to apply an institutional analysis to these findings.

The first part of the chapter is concerned with examining attitudes towards participation in general. This part draws heavily on information gathered through interviews. The second part examines how the use of the Internet fits into this picture. As well as the interviews, it draws on an analysis of the IEG¹⁶ statements of the councils and an analysis of their websites. The chapter explores the proposition that the attitudes towards and understandings of electronic participation are likely to be built upon perceptions of participation in general. However, it is also possible to suggest that the

¹⁶ Implementing Electronic Government Statement

Internet triggers new understandings and methods of participation. Therefore, it is important to understand the general attitudes and strategies for participation before going on to analyse how these strategies change or stay the same with the introduction and use of the Internet.

PART 1: PERCEPTIONS OF AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS PARTICIPATION

In Chapter 2, participation was defined as ‘activities directed towards elected local government to influence the formulation and implementation of policy decisions’. It was also acknowledged that any definition has limitations and in a sense, this research is an attempt to understand how participation is perceived and defined by local policy makers.

This part provides a picture of how the three elected local authorities define and perceive participation. It examines their motivations for consulting the people and the actual methods used. It also analyses the practical and normative concerns about participation. This analysis is important for three reasons. First, participation is a very broad concept that is not only defined differently in academic debates, but also perceived and implemented differently in different locations. Therefore, it is essential to provide an account of how the three local authorities think about participation. Second, providing this picture sets a background for understanding their strategies in relation to the use of the Internet for participation purposes. Third, this enables us to evaluate the degree of continuity (or otherwise) between the *general* understandings of participation and the attitudes towards *electronic* participation.

Definitions of participation

The interviews revealed that participation was mostly understood as providing more information about council services or asking specific questions about particular issues or services, which confirms previous large-scale studies (DETR, 1998; ODPM, 2002). Although it was rare, there were occasions on which participation was understood as involving the use of council services. For example, an officer told that they introduced

skateboard facilities ‘to make young people participate this way’ (OWBC interview, April 2003). Chapter 2 made a distinction between different levels and modes of participation. Although the purpose of this research has been to investigate the different ways in which the public could contribute to local authority policy making and service delivery, there is a need to clarify how the concepts of consultation and participation are understood and distinguished (or otherwise). During the interviews, I tried not to point to such a distinction in order to see if there was any awareness among the interviewees of the differences between the various levels of participation. In general, they were used interchangeably. When a possible distinction was suggested, respondents mentioned some differences between consultation and participation. Consultation was understood as ‘asking specific questions about a particular service’, ‘information fed out to people’ or ‘telling people if there is something going on in the council’ (various interviews). There was a sense that consultation enables the council to do better, but ultimately the reason consultation is taking place is that the council want it, and not necessarily the consultees. Consultation was also seen as a way of ‘ticking the boxes’ for central government especially in relation to Best Value¹⁷ requirements (HDC interview, January 2003).

Participation, by contrast, was mostly perceived as ‘taking an active part’, ‘being involved in the implementation’, ‘actually getting together’, ‘doing something yourself’. It was understood as a ‘longer involvement process’ that is ‘much more community led’ (various interviews). An elected member also commented that “participation would be where the council says we want to deliver this project and you are the people that are going to benefit, come in and help us deliver it” (HDC, January 2003). The role of the actors appeared to be significant in the way they define participation and make distinctions with methods of consultation. For example, actors within the community development departments or those who were highly involved with the community had a higher understanding of participation than actors within specific service departments. A Community Development Manager made the following distinction between a questionnaire and a forum meeting.

¹⁷ For a definition and requirement of Best Value, see Chapter 2.

...This (a questionnaire) I suppose is *consultation*, whereas what you are talking about with the rural forum is more *participation*. Whereas something like this, you can do whilst having a cup of tea in the morning. Rural forum is actually getting people to come along and take an active part rather than just giving their views. And they are very different things (WBC, emphasis added).

Chapter 2 demonstrated that there is a general tendency in the literature sharply to distinguish consultation and participation and sometimes to suggest a hierarchical relation between them. The findings showed that actors in the field use these words interchangeably but make such distinctions when they are asked explicitly. However, the basis of their distinction was different. Many studies suggest that the difference between consultation and participation is related to the degree to which they delegate power and control to citizens, and they argue that participation involves a greater degree of delegation according to this criterion (Arnstein, 1971; Needham, 2002). However, interviewees usually distinguished participation on the basis of 'being involved in the implementation'. They perceived participation as being a longer process of involvement that is much more community led. Their understanding of participation connotes volunteering since they emphasise the 'doing something yourself' aspect. This is an important departure from the tendency to distinguish these concepts based on their degree of power delegation. The definitions offered by interviewees usually included the aspects of 'taking part' and 'implementation'. This echoes the classic definition of Parry et al (1992) who defined participation as "*taking part* in the processes of formulation, passage and *implementation* of public policies" (emphasis added, p. 16). Unsurprisingly, the concept of consultation was used much more than participation. As Chapter 2 argued, this distinction is largely related to linguistics. Local authorities consult; people participate.

Differing motivations for looking for participation

Previous research shows that there has been an increase in the amount, scale and scope of consultation efforts within local authorities (DETR, 1998; ODPM, 2002). Although this is in line with the government demand for more citizen involvement, other reasons help to explain why local authorities are motivated to invite citizen input. In Chapter 2, four aspects of participation were reviewed: instrumental, developmental, liberal and

collectivistic. Although all these aspects were mentioned during the interviews, the instrumental aspect was the most important. Participation initiatives were pursued as a means to improve specific services or policies, to obtain support and legitimacy, to give people the opportunity to give feedback and raise their voice, to double check councillor views and to ensure the representativeness of opinions and priorities. Interviewees mentioned that consultation makes life easier because, once consulted, people cannot complain as much. Looking at the purposes of consultation across the three cases allows a more comprehensive understanding of the attitudes of local authorities towards citizen participation. The following table compares the three cases in relation to their main motivations for consultation.

Table 7.1: Varying motivations for consultation

<i>Location</i>	<i>Most commonly emphasised purpose of consultation</i>
Wellingborough	Double check councillor views and ensure their representativeness
Harborough	To support representative system
Oadby and Wigston	To provide better and more responsive services

In Wellingborough, consultation was seen as a mechanism to double-check the councillor views although this was only rarely pointed out explicitly in the other two cases. Officers often pointed to the value of Local Strategic Partnerships and other participation initiatives as ‘alternative structures for accountability’ (Officer e-champion). This point was raised many times by officers in Wellingborough.

Actually we are consulting people to try to make sure that what these political representatives are saying is really what the general public is actually saying (Head of Revenues, Services and Benefits, WBC, November 2002).

Sometimes it is difficult to find out *what the community want and what the members want...* They are the representatives of the people, but how representative is another question (emphasis added, Community Development Manager, WBC, November 2002).

In Harborough, supporting the representative system was also the main motivation for participation initiatives. An officer noted “four years is a long time, if you just rely on elections, then it is poor. We should be consulting with them” (Democratic Services Team, January 2003). An elected member also stated that there was “no way of making councillors represent all the views in the community” (HDC interview, January 2003). However, what distinguished these two cases was that in Wellingborough, participation and partnership structures were almost seen as alternatives to elected members’ role, whereas in Harborough, participation was seen as a supplement, an additional mechanism to the representative system. In both cases, the importance attributed to participation had some implications for the role of elected members. There was a sense that elected members were becoming community leaders whose role involves balancing different views in the community. As a young member in Harborough put it, “as elected members, that is what we are there for; to give the direction and to lead the policy. But the consultation is there to give extra robustness to those policies to make sure that they really do meet the needs of the people”.

In Oadby and Wigston, the most commonly stated reason for consulting people was to provide more responsive and better services. An officer emphasised that the basic reason for the existence of the council is to provide services to the public and they should build their services based on the priorities of the public rather than the council. For this, they need to consult people (Best Value Officer). Another officer also said “we want to know that the service we provide is the service that they want and require” (Head of Corporate Services). The Chief Executive emphasised the service dimension highlighting the fact that many of their consultation initiatives centre on user and facilities groups such as bowling, leisure centres or friends of the parks.

The purpose of participation differed depending on the departmental identities as well. For example, service departments tended to be interested in getting opinions on an individual service and in finding ways of providing better services. Whereas, unsurprisingly, community development departments were more interested in developmental outcomes such as bringing people together and making them communicate with each other. Actors within these departments were also more likely to

see participation as 'part and parcel' (WBC, Community Development Manager) of their job. Two actors from this department put this as follows:

The reason we consult corporately is to *improve services*, but the reason the council has got a community development section is to *empower local people*. They are different things (emphasis added, WBC, November 2002).

I think the value of the forums is to get people to talk more than anything, more than actions. The outputs are important, that is why people go there, but sometimes you can get outputs just by making the right links with people (WBC interview, November 2002).

To summarise, consultation was largely driven by instrumental reasons although there were differences across cases and individual departments. Government requirements were mentioned as a motivation, but often interviewees noted that they would have consulted the people without those requirements anyway. Interestingly, demand from citizens was not mentioned at all as a motivation for the authorities' participation initiatives. It appeared that participation was originated from the top, encouraged by central government and initiated by local authorities.

The motivations for consultation were highly related to the collective roles as local authorities or individual roles as elected members, officers and so on. The fact that participation was seen as a tool for the development of more responsive services in Oadby and Wigston indicated that actors perceived their role primarily as being that of a service provider. Actors within Wellingborough, on the other hand, tended to see the council's role as that of a community leader seeking for alternative structures of accountability through new participation initiatives.

Interestingly, interviewees did not mention how the results of the consultation affect the decisions. When asked, most commented on the procedures of consultation processes and reported that they incorporate the results in the Best Value reports. There was a sense among officers that it was up to councillors to consider the results or not. In short, participation was not seen as a mechanism that directly influences decisions. Rather, it was perceived as a supportive mechanism for representative democracy, either by providing the opportunity to double check the representativeness of members or by giving the opportunity to people to raise their concerns between the elections.

Methods of consultation

Before demonstrating the most common methods and analysing the possible explanations for the adaptation of these methods, it is useful to develop a categorisation of various methods of participation. Chapter 2 distinguished between five categories (see p. 20):

- Traditional methods
- Consumerist methods
- Deliberative methods
- Forums and panels
- Online methods

These categories may be problematic in the sense that some methods may fall in several different categories at the same time. Nevertheless, for the purposes of analysis, they help to illuminate some distinctions between the three cases and to identify current tendencies.

The case study evidence demonstrated that preferred methods followed largely from the main motivations for participation as well as the local needs, organisational choices and ease and cost of specific methods. As the previous part discussed, the main motivations were mostly instrumental such as the concern to improve specific services. This was reflected in a choice of forums and questionnaires as the most common methods. Forums were of a range of varieties such as area-based (community forums), issue-based (health, drug, access/disability), demographic-based (senior citizens, ethnic minority, rural, Asian elderly) and service-based (friends of the park, leisure centre). Survey methods were also common especially in relation to budget consultations and annual service plans.

Despite the widespread usage of forums and questionnaires, the three local authorities displayed different styles in their approach to consultation methods. In Harborough, the main mechanism was community forums, based on six county council wards resulting from the rural nature of the locality. County council wards were taken as the basis so

that the input of the county councillors could be invited too. The council also used door-to-door surveys through research companies especially for large-scale initiatives such as their budget consultation. The council had a 'talkback roadshow' organised with elected members in order to reach out to rural parts of the council. A tenant magazine was mentioned as a participation method although it was used only as a way of informing tenants. The council foyer also had many information leaflets produced both by the council and by other local agencies and partners.

In Oadby and Wigston, there was an obvious dominance of consumerist methods reflected in their choice of focus groups, annual service surveys, complaint and service satisfaction questionnaires, and user groups. The respondents also mentioned the practice of 'mystery shopper' while talking about their participation initiatives. There were also forums based on particular demographic groups such as senior citizens, multicultural, Asian elderly and access/disability. This was mostly related to the existence of ethnic minority groups and a high percentage of elderly population. There were also forums and user groups based on specific services. The chosen methods reflected a clear service delivery orientation, which was probably related to the Conservative control of the council until 1991 and the customer orientation encouraged by Conservative governments in the 1980s and early 1990s. This also confirms the findings of Lowndes et al (2001a), which were predominantly biased towards consumerist methods. Despite the consumerist tendency and lack of deliberative methods, there was also a plan to establish a tenant jury, although this was only mentioned once by the director responsible for housing. The Chief Executive mentioned a youth video as an innovative method for participation.

In Wellingborough, questionnaires have historically been the dominant method, which was probably related to the Conservative control of the council until 1998 and the tendency towards consumerist methods. This was clearly acknowledged by respondents who often commented that the council needed to develop other methods. The officer e-champion reflected "Our consultation is in general one to one, sending questionnaires to their homes. We ask you a question and you can tell me what you think between those three options". There was also a belief that the council was 'getting better' at initiating

new methods (Officer in council-wide consultation team). This was achieved especially with the efforts of the Community Development Department, which was established after the change in political control in 1999. Following this development, the council established a rural forum, minority forum and various tenants and residents associations. The council also established a citizen panel consisting of 250 residents to be consulted regularly on specific issues. Albeit less frequently, the Community Development Department was also involved in visioning exercises for building facilities for young people. The developments initiated by this department will be discussed in more detail in relation to the scope for institutional design in Chapter 9.

The following table summarises the preferred methods and possible explanations for those preferences in the three local authorities.

Table 7.2: Preferred methods of consultation and possible explanations

<i>Location</i>	<i>Preferred method of consultation</i>	<i>Possible explanation</i>
Harborough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community forums based on six areas • Questionnaires • Issue based forums (youth, drugs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographic/demographic (huge rural area with distinct identities) • Ease and cost of consultation
Oadby and Wigston	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service based forums and user groups • Complaint and satisfaction surveys • Issue and demographic based forums (senior citizens, multicultural, access) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern for providing responsive services • A history of Conservative control • Demographic (existence of ethnic groups, high percentage of elderly)
Wellingborough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaires • Forums (rural, multicultural, tenants) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The history of the council as traditionally Conservative controlled • Demographic factors (existence of

-
- Citizen panels
 - Visioning exercises
- ethnic minorities, large social housing stock)
 - Innovation following change in political control and establishment of a new department
-

Although the selection of the method depended on the ease and cost of the process and the purpose of the consultation, it was also closely connected to the specific local authority's understanding of participation and conceptualisation of democracy. For example, the dominance of consumerist methods associated with service delivery reflects the legacy of consumer democracy. As discussed in Chapter 2, in this model of democracy it is important to understand the demands of the consumer in order to deliver better services. Citizen participation is perceived not only as a condition for more democratic governance, but also as a tool to facilitate managerial purposes. However, it would be unfair to overlook the deliberative methods such as issue based or demographic forums. However, the extent to which they provide a framework for citizen deliberation and the extent to which they are used by citizens could not be investigated within the limits of this research. Evidence gathered through interviews suggested that there were large differences in the scopes of the various forums. For example, in Oadby and Wigston the senior citizens forum, which was emphasised many times as the most popular forum, was apparently a gathering where several agencies in the locality such as the police and health authorities were invited to inform people. By contrast, the rural forum in Wellingborough enabled group discussion in several workshops organised throughout the day.

It is also useful to analyse what methods were not used or mentioned during the interviews. Unsurprisingly, in none of the three cases were referendums used or even mentioned in the interviews as a possibility in the future. Likewise, traditional methods such as questions at public meetings were not mentioned by respondents when asked about the opportunities for participation. This may be due to the limited take up levels of these methods. Alternatively, respondents may have skipped those methods as

'obvious' and not worth mentioning. In Wellingborough, focus groups were not used because of their tendency to lead to 'populist' decisions (Chief Executive). There was a sense that having sometimes to make unpopular decisions was part of the council's role as community leader.

The range of participation initiatives can also be evaluated in terms of the specific models of democracy with which they can be associated. As discussed above, there was a tendency to favour consumerist methods, especially in Oadby and Wigston and to some extent in Wellingborough, despite changing attitudes. There were also limited deliberative forms such as the forums and visioning exercises. The absence of referendums both in practice and during the interviews was not surprising considering that there is no such tradition in the UK. Although different methods were utilised, there was little awareness of the different democracy models with which these methods could be associated.

Normative and practical concerns about participation

Interviews demonstrated that there were normative and practical concerns about citizen participation. It is useful to make a distinction between normative and practical concerns. The practical concerns may well be overcome by using the Internet whereas normative concerns are more likely to pose an ongoing barrier to electronic participation. The most important concern during the interviews was the exclusion of certain groups. Respondents were concerned that some people would be excluded because not everybody is interested in participating. However, there was some confusion about whether people do not participate because they cannot or because they do not want to do so. One interviewee put this as: "Whether they are hard to reach or because they do not want to be reached I am not sure about that...I think there are people we can't reach from all social structures because *they don't want to be reached*" (Head of Community and Cultural Development, WBC). Secondly, they were concerned that participation could lead to deadlock because people cannot see the wider picture and the complexities of decision-making. The third important worry was related to undermining the role of representatives as a result of direct participation. However,

the distribution of these concerns varies depending on the location and the role of the individual within the authority. The following table illustrates the situation in each case.

Table 7.3: Normative and practical concerns about participation¹⁸

<i>Location</i>	<i>Normative/Practical</i>	<i>Arguments against participation</i>
Wellingborough	Normative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving voice to same people (exclusion) • Participants cannot see the wider picture • Undermining representatives (only raised by elected members)
Harborough	Normative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving voice to same people (exclusion) • Undermining representatives (only raised by elected members)
Oadby and Wigston	Practical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation overload/fatigue • Cost of consultation

In Wellingborough, there was a sense of distrust towards participants. There was a belief that participation would only give voice to certain people motivated by self-interest. The Chief Executive commented that: “the danger is, and it is true for all the methods, that if you go and ask people to tell you what they want, the only people that will respond are the axe-grinders, people who have got an agenda, they are not the great mass of the public” (Interview, February 2003). A veteran Conservative member who used to be an influential member but lost most of his power after the change in political control claimed that people were not interested and the council was wasting resources trying to make people participate. He put this in his personal style:

I don't think those things (participation initiatives) do much good to be honest. Public consultation sounds very well but it can often be the wrong thing to do because what so often happens with consultation is you get a pressure group; it is not always representative. They have consultation meetings about all manners of things but you get very little response... 30-40 people would turn up if they are lucky and 20 of those

¹⁸ The table demonstrates which concerns were dominant, normative or practical. Hence it is a matter of balance rather than being normative *or* practical.

would be councillors. It is an utter waste of time (Member e-champion, WBC, January 2003).

Respondents in Wellingborough were also concerned that people are unable to see the wider picture during consultation. Furthermore, they suggested that participation would increase people's expectations and trigger unrealistic demands. A past consultation regarding the construction of a swimming pool, which triggered such high expectations and negatively affected the council's image, was highlighted as an obvious example. An officer, who was also part of the council-wide consultation team, noted the need to 'manage a consultation process and actually get the result that you need' because "there aren't many issues that you can just hand the decision over to people" (Quality and Performance Review Manager, October 2002).

In Oadby and Wigston there was a sense of appreciation of the people who participated. These people were perceived as responsible people who care about the community. However, there was still acknowledgement that these were "articulate, affluent and well-educated" people (Chief Executive, July 2002). The most important concerns in Oadby and Wigston were practical rather than normative. They felt that consulting people is very costly for a small authority. They also suggested that there is a consultation fatigue, which is likely to discourage people from participating. An officer said "I get this feeling with the government that we are almost moving to participation for the sake of participation. Should we be patronising tenants by putting these measures on trying to force them going to the meetings about nothing?" (Director of Community Services, April 2003). Another officer commented that "people have gone into consultation overload in effect because of Best Value and various initiatives" (Interview, January 2003). The Leader of the council was also concerned with both the cost of consultation and the fatigue that it created.

Because of the community plan for the county and districts, because of Best Value, Local Agenda 21, we have had to do too many consultations. The government is insistent that we do some of them and we would have said that the government isn't asking the right questions and to some extent, we are repeating things. There is a cost involved in every consultation (Leader, OWBC, January 2003).

The worries about the cost of participation in Oadby and Wigston confirms the findings of Lowndes et al (2001a) which suggest that justifying greater expenditure on participation is even more difficult for a small authority when there is also pressure to provide services.

Nevertheless, unlike Oadby and Wigston, in Harborough the cost of consultation was viewed as an opportunity. It played a role in motivating the council to seek joint schemes with other councils in order to reduce costs. One of the purposes of the Welland Partnership is to “increase public participation in the democratic process” (IEG Statement, p. 3). There were again concerns about the representativeness of views arising within consultation activities. As a middle-ranking officer commented: “There are only a handful of people who are interested. The danger is you get ideas of certain people. There are people who turn out at every meeting and you cannot rely on their views because they are available” (Democratic Services Team, January 2003).

In addition to variances across locations, concerns about participation varied across individual roles as well. The worry that participation might undermine the role of the representatives was only raised by elected members; no officer considered it a potential problem. One elected member in Wellingborough implied that officers might be using consultation ‘to get behind their back’:

As councillors, you represent the people that voted for you or could have voted for you. You are supposed to know what they want. Therefore, why try to get behind my back and ask what they think? I have been elected to represent them (Member, e-champion, WBC, January 2003).

Although his style was extreme, his ideas were shared by other members too. In Harborough there was a sense that elected members are there to represent the people and that this “has got to be accepted as a form of consultation too” (HDC, January 2003). The Leader of the Council also commented that: “as elected members, many of us think that we are supposed to be the elected representatives, what do we have a community forum for” (HDC, April 2003). Interestingly, no such concern was expressed among the members in Oadby and Wigston. On the contrary, officers in

Oadby and Wigston commented that councillors are the ones who encourage consultation the most, as the following comment shows:

They (councillors) actively encourage participation. I sit in committees many times. The members would always say 'what about the local people, have you consulted them? If you haven't, go back and do so before we make decisions'. They actually defer making decisions before, because they want to know what the public have thought. So I can't honestly put my hand on my heart and tell you the councillors here wouldn't agree with consultation (Head of Corporate Services, January 2003).

When deliberately asked whether councillors see participation as a threat to their role, the Chief Executive replied: "I don't see that it is going to be a big problem here because at the end of the day they see their role as balancing out all the various comments and interests" (July 2002). While officers in Wellingborough and Harborough stated that one of the main purposes of consultation was to double-check the views of councillors, this was never mentioned as a motivation in Oadby and Wigston. This might be indicative of a greater degree of harmony between officers and councillors in Oadby and Wigston in terms of their approach to participation. It is necessary to evaluate the concerns about participation in conjunction with how participation is actually defined. In Oadby and Wigston, there was not much normative concern about participation. However, the council's understanding of participation was different from others in the sense that participation was mostly perceived within the parameters of a consumerist understanding. Therefore, the fact that the council does not have many concerns about participation (except costs) does not indicate that it attributes a higher value to participation.

Scope for enhancing participation from above

It is important to investigate whether local authorities believe there to be any scope for enhancing participation from the top. Without this belief, it is less likely that they would be trying to facilitate citizen participation. For this purpose, it is worth examining how local authorities perceive the causes of participation and non-participation. Chapter 2 outlined various explanations of participation and non-participation, some of which rely on the properties of the citizenry (micro level), on national political institutions (macro

level) or on the availability of channels and a participatory culture at the local authority level (meso level). An analysis of the perspectives of local authorities on the relevance of these explanations is essential. The research evidence on the scope for top-down facilitation of participation clustered around two distinct narratives:

- 1- It is not possible because there are no big issues to stimulate people to participate; they are not interested in the council or their community; politics has a negative image that puts people off; they do not need to participate anyway because they have everything and we provide good services.
- 2- There is a possibility that people's attitudes towards the council can be changed and they may become more willing to participate. This happened in the past, especially after political control changes, so it is possible. People may be abstaining from participation due to a lack of resources and confidence. If we can provide this, there is a possibility to engage them.

Narrative one

There was a sentiment that there is no scope for local authorities to engender participation because of structural problems such as the negative image of politics and locality-specific reasons such as the affluence of the local people or the non-existence of big issues. These factors were raised to different degrees in the three locations. In Harborough, there was a belief that people do not participate mainly because they are happy with the council services or they do not need council services anyway because of the affluence in the district. An elected member stated that because they provide a good service, people do not care (Member e-champion, January 2003). An officer also remarked that, "providing the bins are collected and the streets are swept, generally the vast majority of the people don't have a lot to do with the council. They haven't got problems; they don't need us as often as perhaps people in Leicester City do" (January 2003). Two members emphasised the effects of affluence on levels of participation as the following quotes show.

I think because of that level of general satisfaction there are not many people who are willing to come forward and express views at things like the community forum. I am not trying to minimise any problems but they are middle class in the main and tend to feel that they don't have really that much to complain about (Leader, HDC, April 2003).

People are relatively affluent and I don't tend to have many people coming forward for the problems that they can't resolve. I do not find that people rely on me as much as perhaps in an area where people are less affluent and more deprived. Because they have got some level of wealth, they are able to change things themselves (Member, HDC, January 2003).

In Wellingborough, there was a common belief that people were not interested in their community or the council. An officer commented that businesses in particular were not interested in the locality because the only reason they were located in Wellingborough was that it was cheaper. An elected member also felt strongly about the lack of interest in the community and the council. He complained that "they don't know who is on the council. They don't know the difference between county, parish and district councils. They don't even read the local newspaper and then they wonder why they don't know what is going on" (Member, e-champion WBC, January 2003). The belief that people are not interested led some actors to think that even though they provide the opportunities, some people would not take them. The Community Development Manager commented "You give people the option, if they don't want to take it they don't take it...I think you just have to give them the opportunity and hope that over time people will realise that it is worth spending five minutes to give your views" (November 2002).

In Oadby and Wigston, it was believed that there were no big issues that would motivate people to take an active part. However, what distinguishes Oadby and Wigston from the other two cases is that there was a strong sense of criticism against the working of politics in general and the central government in particular. The Director of Resources claimed that "politics itself has to bear the blame for the decline in participation" (Interview, January 2003). Similarly, another officer was concerned about the influence of national politics on lack of interest at the local level. He said: "I think a lot of local participation will take its trend from what is happening at the national

government and that particularly generates genuine disenchantment and lack of interest” (OWBC, January 2003).

In short, approaches that fall into this category perceived a lack of participation as something related to the properties of the citizens (that they are not interested or they are happy) or to the fact that there were no big issues to attract people. There were some suggestions that politics in general has to bear the blame but this was mostly to do with national politics rather than local. Comments about the limited interest from citizens were usually raised as *complaints* about citizens. There was limited sense that there may be scope for changing citizens’ attitudes. This may be related to the fact that local authorities perceived themselves primarily as service providers.

Narrative two

The case studies also revealed that some interviewees believed that there is scope for influencing levels and modes of participation from the top. This was mainly brought up implicitly when they referred to their previous activities and how they affected citizen participation. For example, in Wellingborough, there was a sense of a complete break from the Conservative controlled past of the council. The Leader of the council (Labour) believed that what they had done after they were elected in 1999 made a big difference in establishing links with voluntary organisations. He was proud of the newly established groups that had emerged with their help and initiative. He commented thus:

We established a community forum, every two months we meet, we are directly involved. We set up or encourage them to set up things like tenants groups. So we now have at least half a dozen active tenants groups and 2-3 active residents groups. None of those existed three-four years ago. *They were all supported by the council, they didn't happen to exist. Our people went out, encouraged them, helped them and trained them in community skills* (emphasis added, Leader, WBC, January 2003).

Similarly, the Chief Executive noted that the council had put mechanisms in place allowing people to engage with the council and that “this message is slowly seeping out to the people” (February 2003). Officers implied similar views by highlighting the changes in the political and management levels in the council. An officer commented

that “People had been out of touch from the council for years” and they are only now “getting the capacity to start engaging with people on an ongoing basis” (Quality and Performance Review Manager, October 2002). There were also hints that the negative publicity of the council did not help in getting people to participate but that the response rates has been increasing in the last three years. The Community Development Manager guessed that “this might be because of the improving image of the council” (Interview, November 2002). The establishment of the Community Development Department was followed by new structures such as the citizen panel, a rural forum, a council-wide consultation team, capacity building programmes for tenants and excluded groups and some visioning exercises.

In Oadby and Wigston, there was also a sense that the change in political control in 1991 from Conservatives to Liberal Democrats had triggered a new era in terms of making the council more open to citizen input. According to the Chief Executive, this was followed by the “creation of user groups for people who use the council facilities, creation of little discussion groups and forums, lots of questionnaires, lots of public meetings, rights to speak at council meetings long before it was commonly available” (Interview, July 2002). She believed that these council initiatives made a difference and that people started to have higher expectations of the council in terms of engaging with the citizens and listening to their concerns.

The above remarks imply that there is some belief that the council’s strategy does make a difference in terms of people’s attitudes towards participation. Surprisingly, only one interviewee commented that some people might not participate because they do not have the resources to do so. She said that people might not be participating because: “Maybe they have got far more important things on their plate like how they can afford the next pair of shoes for the kids” (Community Development Manager, November 2002). Despite the absence of a direct reference to this issue, respondents on many occasions highlighted the importance of capacity building, providing training for resident associations and offering computer skills courses. This implies that there is a belief that participation can be engendered through top-down initiatives.

Chapter 2 suggested that there might be scope for local authorities to affect the levels and styles of participation. The findings presented here have demonstrated that not all actors believe there to be such a scope. The ability of local authorities to affect levels and styles of participation is limited by their perceptions of citizens, who are often viewed as uninterested. There were also references to macro conditions, such as the negative image of politics in general which was believed to discourage people from politics. However, there was evidence that local authorities felt they had been able to affect not only levels and styles of participation, but also the general attitudes of citizens towards the council. This was achieved especially following political control changes. The fact that respondents emphasised the importance of capacity building and training implies that they acknowledge the importance of top-down initiatives for enhancing participation. The second narrative emphasises the significance of meso level variables and indicates that the availability of participation channels and institutional arrangements at the local level can make a difference.

So far, the chapter has been concerned with analysing general attitudes towards participation in relation to main motivations, preferred methods, and concerns about participation. Before proceeding to analyse the attitudes towards electronic participation, it is useful to summarise the findings.

- During the interviews, participation and consultation were used interchangeably without necessarily suggesting a hierarchy between them. When asked deliberately about possible distinctions, participation was mostly described as taking part in the *implementation* of policies. This was a departure from the dominant approaches in the literature, which attribute a higher significance to participation as opposed to consultation.
- Participation was sought mostly for instrumental purposes especially in relation to service improvement and better-informed decisions. In this sense, participation initiatives reflect the information needs of local authorities. In none of the cases was citizen demand a motivation for initiating participation channels. When analysed on a case basis, service improvement was particularly important in Oadby and

Wigston; this can be explained by the consumerist legacy of the Conservative controlled history of the council. In Wellingborough, participation was seen as a way of double-checking the representativeness of the elected members. In Harborough, there was also a sense of ensuring representativeness. However, what distinguished the two cases is that in Wellingborough, participation initiatives were seen almost as *alternatives* whereas in Harborough they were seen as *supplements* to the representative system.

- In all cases there was a sense that the role of elected members has been changing towards community leadership and balancing different views rather than being just representatives.
- In terms of preferred methods of participation, forums and questionnaires were the most favoured methods. Especially in Oadby and Wigston, consumerist methods were very popular, reflecting the main motivation for participation: service improvement. However, there were also innovative methods in all cases reflecting a tendency to combine old and innovative methods depending on local needs, organisational goals and limitations.
- There were normative concerns about participation mostly arising from the fear of exclusion of certain groups and the threat to the role of elected representatives. There were also practical concerns especially in relation to the cost of participation and the possibility of consultation overload.
- There was only a limited sense of the scope for enhancing participation, particularly due to limited interest from citizens. However, there were also examples of achievement, especially in Wellingborough where the change in political control and establishment of a new department led to the emergence of new structures and changing attitudes towards participation.

PART 2: THE INTERNET AND PARTICIPATION

The second part analyses how the perceptions of and attitudes towards electronic participation depart from or coincide with the above findings. It examines the ways in which local authorities perceive the Internet, the applications of the Internet that are most used and the practical and normative concerns about the use of the Internet for participation purposes. In order to understand the approaches to electronic participation, it is also necessary to examine whether respondents are aware of the potential of the Internet for democratic purposes and especially citizen participation. It could be the case that the Internet is mostly seen as a service delivery or information provision tool.

Perceptions of the Internet

Chapter 4 introduced the concept of ‘interpretative flexibility’ (Pinch and Bijker, 1984) and suggested that, rather than understanding the Internet as a given technology it should be considered as a social artefact whose meaning is continuously being constructed by many actors. This section analyses the ways that local authorities construct such meanings. The purpose is to explain which aspects of the Internet (e.g. information provision, transactions/service delivery or electronic participation) are considered most central. The section also aims to explain which applications of the Internet (e.g. website, portal, email) are preferred.

The empirical study revealed that the central aspects of the Internet for local authorities were the information provision and online service delivery aspects. The Internet was much less likely to be considered as a tool for stimulating citizen participation. Only after this possibility was mentioned did some interviewees acknowledge it as a possibility. However, even in those cases, electronic participation was usually seen simply as electronic voting. Chapter 4 developed an operationalisation of e-democracy and e-government. Accordingly, applications of e-government were updating software or hardware for more efficiency, building or updating an Intranet, the use of email for internal purposes, building call centres to provide information or services, and providing online transactions such as paying council tax. Based on that operationalisation, it is possible to argue that e-government purposes were more common than e-democracy

purposes. However, interviewees tended to talk about these activities as if they were e-democracy applications. Although this research is about electronic modes of participation, it took considerable effort to keep the focus of the interviews on the use of the Internet for participation (and maybe e-democracy in general). This is partly because in practice these two agendas were driven together, as discussed in Chapter 3. After the possible use of the Internet for democratic purposes was hinted at and an open question about how interviewees understood e-democracy was asked, three main aspects were mentioned: online voting, consulting people, and informing people.

Although many definitions of e-democracy include ‘deliberation’ in addition to consultation and informing (Chadwick, 2003; Tsagarousianou, 1999), this was never mentioned during the interviews. This is interesting considering that Harborough already encourages citizen deliberation through the online discussion forums on their community portals. Similarly, there were plans in the second IEG Statement of Wellingborough concerning the establishment of community portals with discussion forums that will be “debating areas for various community groups and organisations” (IEG 2, p. 8). Thus, even the actors who were already involved in experiments with deliberative forms of democracy could not think of the deliberation aspect immediately when they were asked about their definitions of e-democracy. This might be because they do not believe deliberation can be achieved online, or they may not be aware of the potential for using the Internet for this purpose. When the value of online discussion forums was specifically highlighted, respondents complained that they are used only by very few people. Although take up levels may increase over time, current low levels echo certain sceptical views in the academic debates about the value and robustness of online communities. Falk (1998), for example, believes that ease of communication on the Web does not ensure robust online communities and suggests that such communities can only stretch out from local communities. Reflecting this concern, Harborough established the two community portals around two town centres that people identify with instead of having one portal for the whole district. In spite of this, they could not manage to generate much discussion.

The understanding of the website was another indication that the councils perceive information provision and service delivery as the primary aspects of the Internet. An officer was interested in “putting lots of information on the website” (WBC interview, November 2002), while a head of service was interested in developing a ‘benefits calculator’ to be put on the website (WBC interview, November 2002). A webmaster thought the website should be a second office “where residents can get information that they could by coming here or phoning us; paying bills or just getting information. It is an office there 24 hours; an office they can mould to suit their needs” (OWBC interview, October 2002). Analysing the websites also confirmed the finding that participation was not seen as the priority purpose for local authorities (see website analysis).

Analysis of the IEG statements of the three authorities also confirmed that service delivery and information provision purposes were more important than participation, despite differences between the cases. Oadby and Wigston’s IEG statements, for example, emphasised the “maximum amount of information provision” and the “ability to complete transactions on-line without the need for staff interactions” (IEG 1, p. 11). In their second IEG statement, it was said that “numerous consultations have also been conducted online during the last year” (p. 8). However, the website analysis showed that there were very few such consultations. Moreover, interviewees reflected that even when consultations were conducted, they would only receive a few replies. In Wellingborough, there was a mixed situation. The first IEG statement set out their strategy for “how ICT can be used to underpin the role of democracy, *community consultation*, the provision of services and the increasingly important role of partnership across service sector” (emphasis added, IEG 1, Introduction). Wellingborough’s second IEG statement also “describes the use of technology to support initiatives related to service delivery and *community participation*” (emphasis added, IEG 2, Introduction). Therefore, despite the dominance of the service delivery aspect during the interviews, the IEG statement, which was a formal document prepared for the government, made more references to participation and consultation aspects. The discrepancies between formal and informal rules will be discussed in the next chapter from an institutional perspective.

Harborough's IEG statements demonstrated a completely different approach, which was more enthusiastic about the use of the Internet for participation purposes. The first statement claimed that "e-government will assist the equality of accessibility for all citizens who may otherwise experience exclusion because of geographical, physical or social factors" (p. 2). Although the emphasis here was on service delivery, the subsequent paragraphs emphasised the importance of its use for participation purposes:

Electronic means can also *improve public consultation and participation* in the democratic process, as already evidenced by the considerable experience in Rutland and Stamford. It can be an excellent means of improving greatly the flow of information to and from citizens, thereby enabling them to be well informed about key issues affecting their lives. In turn, this can *expand the citizen's means of influence* on local government and other public services that, over time, can greatly assist in breaking down barriers and enabling local government to *re-engage with local communities* (emphasis added, p. 2).

This is highly relevant to the fact that the council perceived the Internet as a solution to the problems arising from the rural location. A councillor thus commented that "the advantage for the council is if you can get consultation through that process (electronically) that is a cheap way, very cost effective way of getting people's views in such a big district" (HDC interview, January 2003). It is not surprising that Harborough was the most enthusiastic case considering that they were one of the 25 'Pathfinders'¹⁹ selected on a nation-wide basis to experiment with online service delivery and consultation through the portal concept.

From the case study evidence, it appears that three factors have conspired to result in a preference being accorded to service delivery concerns. First, providing online services was perceived as something that could attract people to the website. The Head of Community Development Department in Wellingborough commented "we need to use whatever we have to hook people either by getting better public service or by being engaged in democracy" (November, 2002). An officer in Harborough also mentioned that online services 'tactically' help in attracting people. He noted:

¹⁹ See Chapter 3 for Pathfinders in general and Chapter 6 for Welland Partnership as a Pathfinder project.

Tactically also it helps getting people on board. If they think they can make planning applications online then that initially has more value than contributing to a debate on car parking. It is something useful (emphasis added, Scrutiny Research Officer, HDC, October 2002).

Secondly, online services were seen as tangible proofs that could be used to convince councillors to approve budgets on technology spending. This was especially true in Oadby and Wigston. The Chief Executive said that they “really had to battle hard with the members to get them to spend money on IT because they see other priorities. *These are not vote winners*” (emphasis added, July 2002). In Harborough, an officer thought that members viewed online services as significant achievements before elections. As he put it:

I remember the looks of amazement on their faces in the demonstration of the online planning site. Definitely, they see it (online services) as the priority. *From a political view, they want to be able to point at achievements before the election* (emphasis added, Research Scrutiny officer).

Lastly, online services were seen as something tangible that could be presented to government as progress, especially in the context of service delivery targets by 2005²⁰. An officer in Harborough said that they had to make their services online because of the relevant Best Value indicator. Another said that online services were important “Because we want to be seen delivering services in a different, more effective way” (Interview, October 2002).

To summarise, the Internet was mostly seen as an information provision and service delivery tool rather than a participation medium. There was awareness about the possibilities of electronic voting, but much less awareness about its potential to be used for broader participation purposes. The empirical evidence presented above suggests that this can be explained by tactical reasons, for instance to impress councillors. There were also signs that participation purposes could be the next stage in their plans. For example, in Oadby and Wigston, the IT Manager said it was not a priority area but that it was something they would be able to deliver once they had created the infrastructure.

²⁰ For service delivery targets by 2005, see Chapter 3.

In Harborough, it was a priority to complete the online planning project to meet the Pathfinder project targets. Interviewees suggested that in the next phase they would be more interested in exploiting the participation possibilities. Besides all these tactical or practical explanations, electronic participation may also be rejected on normative grounds, which will be discussed later.

Motivations for using the Internet and preferred applications

The interview evidence showed that the most important application of the Internet for local authorities is the Web (in fact their website or portal), which is in line with general understandings of the Internet. The research also demonstrated that local authorities tended to use the Internet in conjunction with other new technologies especially call centres. Usually the utilisation of a range of technologies was implemented deliberately so as to offer a wider choice.

The three local authorities chose different paths in terms of particular applications of ICTs. While Wellingborough chose to focus on using the telephone (call centre), Harborough was more ambitious in exploiting the Internet. Authorities' preferences were shaped both by local factors such as the nature of the citizenry, and organisational factors such as the cost of designing and using those technologies. They were also affected by developments in the local government field. By 2000, having websites had become a norm for local authorities and none of the three cases could have thought about not having one. The importance of isomorphic processes will be discussed from an institutionalist perspective in the next chapter. Table 7.4 illustrates the preferred applications. Since the research is concerned with the applications of the Internet, the analysis does not include the details of call centres.

Table 7.4: Preferred Internet applications in the three cases

<i>Location</i>	<i>Preferred applications</i>
Wellingborough	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Customer Relations Management System (Call centre based on telephone technology)• Official website• Community portal (planned in the second IEG statement²¹)
Harborough	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community portals around two town centres• Official website• Welland Call Centre (planned)
Oadby and Wigston	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Official website• Youth portal• Plans for a call centre

Wellingborough's choice in favour of telephone technology was primarily related to the level of affluence among the local population. Wellingborough, especially the town itself, was not a particularly wealthy place. The council was aware that there is an issue of Internet access. The council undertook a survey as part of the IEG statement and according to the first IEG Statement:

...39% of respondents stated that they have access to the Internet and e-mail. In the light of these findings (which are borne out by regional research by MORI) it is the Council's intention to initially commit its resources to a model of customer service provision that *prioritises 'traditional' channels like voice, land mail and face-to-face technologies* (emphasis added, p.7).

The officer e-champion in Wellingborough also noted that 'If it was a wealthier place we would invest more on e-government but Internet is not what the community that we serve is about' (WBC interview, June 2002). Another officer clearly stated that this fact affected their choice for exploiting telephone technology, commenting: "Social exclusion is one of the areas we are concerned with. That is why we think the telephone

²¹ This was not materialised yet by the end of 2003.

is just as important as the Internet. It is far easier for a range of people to contact us by phone” (WBC interview, November 2002). Despite the relatively low enthusiasm for newer technologies, the council still aimed to invest in new technologies. According to their first IEG statement, this was because of the existence of a small pocket of users, the future potential of these technologies and their cost effectiveness (p. 7). Interviewees sometimes commented that they were investing for the future generations despite the lack of current demand (WBC Leader interview, January 2003).

Although their strategy was mostly based on telephony, they had an official website (www.wellingborough.gov.uk) which was launched in 2000. They were also planning (in the first IEG) to launch a transactional website that would enable the provision of online services; however, this did not materialise. Instead, there were plans in their second IEG to establish community portals similar to those in Harborough. The portals were planned to offer information about local services and facilities “a range of tools and techniques to help promote active engagement with and between citizens” (p. 7) such as discussion forums, online polling, community self-publishing opportunities, a facility to permit the publishing of meeting minutes as well as an e-mail notification list. However, there were only a few people aware of this project and even the Leader did not know much about it. There was an obvious element of imitation in the decision to launch community portals. As the Chief Executive explained: “I think we looked at what Welland has done and regarded it as being successful. They have done something which is good and why shouldn’t we build on that? We are happy to do that” (WBC interview, February 2003). The importance of mimetic processes will be discussed in the next chapter.

In Oadby and Wigston, the two main applications were the official website (www.oadby-wigston.gov.uk) and the youth website (www.yonet.co.uk). At the back office the council had also been investing in infrastructure in order to provide services through the website, telephone, and reception. The council ‘deliberately played down’ (ICT Services Manager, October 2002) the youth site so that it would not be seen as a council initiative. However, the council did not have the resources to maintain two websites at the same time and was looking for local colleges to take over the update and

content of the youth website. During the course of the research, not a single person visited the youth website (Community Development Officer). In fact, the council did not even want to advertise it much because there were insufficient resources to deal with potential interest. The intention for the youth portal was “to create a community feeling with the youngsters. So it is *entertaining* hopefully and *informative* as well” (emphasis added, Webmaster, October 2002). The ICT Services Manager also emphasised the information provision aspect: “we want another channel of communication with youth for getting across information on health and social issues”. Whereas he noted the main website was intended to be about ‘online transactions’ (Interview, October 2002).

One reason Oadby and Wigston was interested in having a specific site for the young can be related to the problems of anti-social behaviour in the borough. When I asked the Community Development officer about its purpose she replied: “It is to give them a voice; it is democracy, isn’t it? But *I don’t know if they are doing it because we had problems with anti-social behaviour*. That could be a reason” (emphasis added, November 2002). Having a youth portal is in fact in line with the borough’s attitude towards young people. They have a ‘young citizen award’, which has a high profile. There were also rumours about having another site for the elderly people, which did not materialise during the time of the research. Their second IEG statement noted “By developing diverse and multiple web presences targeted at particular groups within the Community, the council aims to reach as broad an audience as possible” (p. 6).

In Harborough, there were two community portals, which were based on the two town centres (<http://www.marketharboroughonline.co.uk> and www.lutterworth-online.co.uk) as well as the official website of the council (www.harborough.gov.uk). The idea of community portals was actually being taken from Rutland, which was a neighbouring council and part of the Welland partnership. The portals had more or less the same outline and style but there were slight differences depending on local circumstances. They also deliberately played down the council’s involvement in the portal. The E-government project officer commented, “We want the community to take control with everything on that and look after it for themselves” (E-government Project Officer, November 2002). Despite the portals being seen as the priority, the council website was

also perceived as important because as the E-government Project Officer put it, “we don’t want to lose our identity as Harborough District Council”. The council was also interested in establishing a Welland Call Centre, which was a change from its enthusiastic stance about the Internet to a more moderate/humble telephone technology. The second IEG Statement featured many more references to face to face and telephone communication. This could be explained by three reasons. One is related to the fact that the second IEGs were heavily prescribed, and all local authorities had to follow strict guidelines in writing them. Second, having experimented with the Internet as a Pathfinder, they might have realised the importance of other communication channels. Third, they might have had limited response rates through the portals and this might have prompted them to exploit the more conventional methods.

Focusing on participation: Analysis of websites

Until this point, the chapter has been concerned with analysing the perceptions of the Internet, motivations for its use and its specific applications. This section focuses on the ‘actual’ use of the Internet to enhance participation. In other words, the section reveals the extent to which general attitudes towards the Internet and motivations about its use come into practice. For this purpose, I have primarily relied on the analysis of websites. The extent to which the Internet is used by councillors will also be considered based on interview data as well as the information obtained from the websites.

As suggested in the methodology chapter, the dominant approach towards analysing websites is to start from the features of the Internet and to ask whether the examined websites have these properties or not. Chapter 6 argued that this would lead to a technology-led evaluation of websites. Therefore, the methodological framework used to analyse the websites here is based upon the conceptual framework that was developed in the previous chapters, specifically around ‘participation’. However, other aspects of the websites such as the extent to which they provide information about local democracy (elections, councillors, committees and so on) were also analysed in order to provide a context. The framework that was used to analyse the websites and the full findings can be found in Appendix 5.

The analysis demonstrated that the use of the websites for participation was very limited, which is not surprising considering that perceptions of the Internet centre on information provision and service delivery. Where there was any kind of consultation, it tended to be quick response consultations such as online polls. In Oadby and Wigston, there were online forms such as 'make a complaint', 'make a general enquiry' and 'comment on the website'. The comment on the website section had a trick. On the right hand of the feedback page there was a question asking, "what did you think of our online services?" The default answer was 'very helpful' (out of five possible answers: excellent, very helpful, quite good, okay, lacking something). In the Local Performance Plan, the council proudly claimed that most of the users thought the website was 'very good'. The only electronic consultation available was an online poll about budget priorities inviting the respondent to make a choice between nine issues. In the second stage of the analysis, there was no online poll available. In Harborough, the council had regular online polls asking yes/no questions. One such poll on crime and disorder received ten responses and another one on introducing car park charges which was a very controversial issue at the time received only half a dozen responses (Research and Development Officer, October 2002). There were also polls on less political issues such as whether people favour the introduction of broadband in the district.

The analysis also demonstrated that the websites were very poor in initiating deliberative forms of participation. Only in Harborough was there a discussion section, which included nine forums titled general, youth, clubs, business, car sharing and transport, genealogy, community safety, Market Harborough neighbourhood watch, and South Leicestershire Voluntary Forum. The forums have not attracted much interest. According to the E-government project officer, it is because they did not try to stimulate discussion. However, other interviewees mentioned a lack of interest on the citizens' side. The E-government Project Officer noted that they were not "trying to sell it as a political site. It is a community site" and hence they wanted there to be some relevant topics like car park charges. However, they "also want them to talk about last week's football scores". He continued to say that they would keep the council website for "sort of *boring* information like Best Value plans, minutes and agendas of council meetings and bits about the structure of the council and how people get there" (emphasis added,

Interview, November 2002). The implications of the IT actors' involvement in strategies will be discussed in Chapter 9.

The community portals are mostly seen as websites that local people would use as some kind of 'local google' allowing them to find information about the locality. However, discussion forums went beyond that and had some influence on local authority decisions. There was a discussion in one of the forums around the need for employing a 'lollipop lady' near a school. Officers from the council joined the debate and explained the problems about employing someone. In the end, the council decided to employ someone and this was announced in the forum by an officer. One councillor mentioned that he had been regularly posting emails and following the discussions. Therefore, there is a possibility that despite being a discussion forum among citizens rather than a political forum, the debate may have indirectly affected decisions.

Another way of exploiting the websites to enhance participation is by using them to support conventional modes of participation. This could be done by advertising various consultation events; inviting people to participate in those meetings; providing information about their agendas as well as the results of previous participation activities. However, this opportunity was also not exploited to any great extent. Some consultation activities, such as the dates and locations of forum meetings, were advertised through press releases in Wellingborough and Harborough. However, this was difficult to find on the website, since press releases included various other news items. One of the most effective ways the websites were used was related to the announcements of council and committee meetings. All websites had calendars of meetings. However, agendas and minutes of meetings were not available. Only in Harborough, as part of the Pathfinder scheme, were agendas and reports of the Planning and Regulatory Committee available.

Previous research points at the need for releasing the results of any consultation in order to show people what they have said and what the decision maker has done (Lowndes et al, 2001b). In both Wellingborough and Harborough, there was some information about the results of previous consultations. In Wellingborough, this was related to the

Wellingborough East (WEAST) Project²² and in Harborough, this concerned the results of a comprehensive budget consultation.

Websites can also be exploited to support the institutions of representative democracy. They could be used to announce surgery hours and locations, to disclose councillor email addresses and to provide information about committee memberships so that people would know who is responsible for which issues if they are interested.

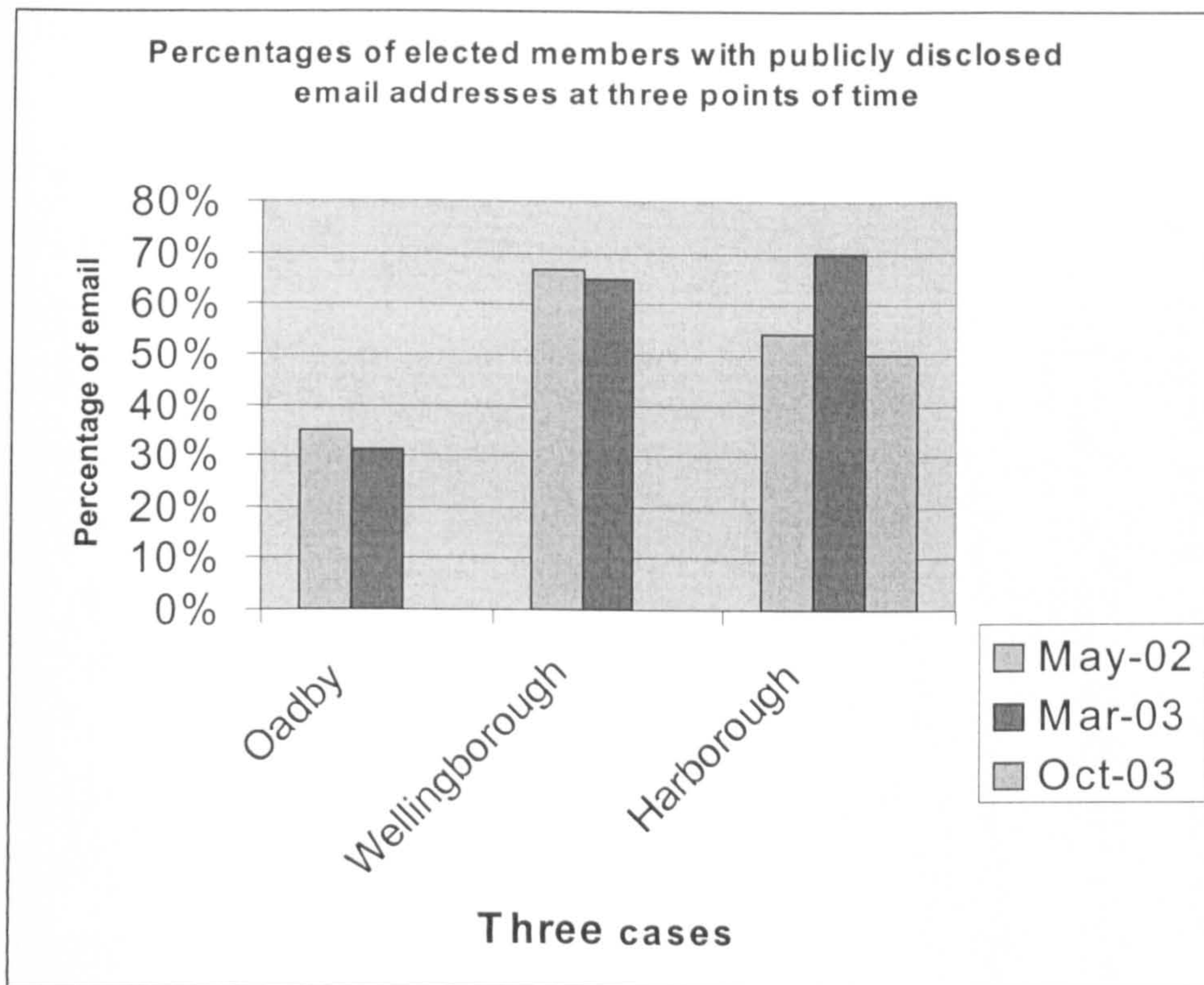
Surprisingly, surgery hours were not disclosed in any of the cases (except for just one ward out of six in Wellingborough at the first stage). Ironically, in Wellingborough, a young MP, Paul Stichombe, used the council website regularly to announce his surgery hours. The fact that putting this information on the website is so simple confirms the argument of the research that its absence cannot be explained by looking at the properties of the technology alone.

The extent to which councillors used the email to communicate with citizens is also important. Although traditionally it is very common that councillor surgery times are published and distributed through council newsletters, this was not done online. Another interesting observation was that while the surgery hours and telephone numbers of councillors were provided in the council newsletters, there was no mention of email, even though many members had email addresses. The following chart shows the number of councillors with a council-provided and publicly available email address at three different times²³.

²² WEAST is a huge development project that involves construction of 3000 homes, 110 hectares of employment land and all associated facilities. As part of their partnership approach, the council organised a range of consultation events and workshops with landowners/developers, key stakeholders and local people.

²³ In October 2003, only Harborough had email addresses for councillors. The fact that the other two councils did not have email addresses can be explained by the elections that took place in May 2003. It takes time for the councils to provide email addresses and sometimes equipment and training for the newly elected members.

Figure 7.1: Elected Members with Publicly Available E-mail Addresses



Source: Website visits on stated dates

However, the existence of email addresses does not necessarily mean that they are used. An anecdote by an elected member in Oadby and Wigston confirmed this:

There are stupid things. There was this person who has been emailing one of our councillors about some complaint. But he (the councillor) hasn't got a computer and nobody thought to take that person's email off the computer and put into his pigeonhole so that he can collect it. I phoned him and said aren't you going to do something and he knew nothing about it.

This anecdote shows that although the councils provide them with email addresses, some councillors do not have the equipment, skills or the inclination to use them. In those cases, the email is printed by an officer and sent to the councillors by post. In some cases, the councillors had their own private email addresses. In Harborough, an elected member who considered himself an 'electronic councillor' had received emails only through his private address and none from the council-provided one. In Wellingborough, the member e-champion who, according to their website, did not have

any email address did in fact have one. This indicates a degree of incoherence and a lack of strategy in relation to the usage of email by councillors.

Looking at the number of members with email addresses may be misleading. It is also important to investigate the purpose of using the email. Members were encouraged to use email to communicate with the officers so that they could save money in printing and postage costs. Use of email for communicating with the public was much less widespread. This might be due to a preference for personal communication or concerns about exclusion of certain groups. Many officers complained that the councillors could not see the benefits of using the Internet and they mostly related this to the councillors' age profile. Limited take up of email among members can also be explained by the fact that being an elected member does not require the same degree of professionalisation as officers who increasingly have to use the email as part of their jobs. The fact that the use of email at the national level²⁴ creates problems in terms of the volume of communication was not relevant at the local level. Even the members who used email extensively reported that they did not receive so many emails that they encountered many difficulties in managing them.

The above analysis has certain limitations, which were discussed in Chapter 6 on methodology. It is important to mention again that the framework is limited in the sense that it does not measure the *citizens'* perspectives and the actual use of online participation features by citizens. However, according to officers the usage was very limited. An officer in Oadby and Wigston complained that he put a budget consultation on their website and only received one reply in two months (Director of Resources, January 2003). Lack of interest on the citizens' side (real or perceived) was an important obstacle for the full utilisation of the Internet for participation purposes, and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 10.

It is apparent from the preceding analysis that the use of the websites for enhancing participation was limited. The use of email by members to communicate with citizens was also limited. The empirical evidence demonstrated that the features of the Internet

²⁴ See Chapter 3, for an example from House of Commons.

that led many speculations about its role for enhancing democracy were not always exploited. Although email has been praised for its interactivity and speed (Weare, 2002), interviewees did not always perceive it as a suitable communication medium. This was mostly due to a preference towards personal contact but it was also related to the complexities of local government business. An officer said that elected members would still pick up the phone because it is easier to discuss complex issues in this way than it is through email (Director of Resources, OWBC, January 2003). Nevertheless, there were some examples of where the unique features of the Internet were used. For example, in Oadby and Wigston, by launching a youth portal, the council aimed to target a specific group, which was an exploitation of the 'narrow casting' feature of the Internet. In Harborough, the multi-dimensional character of the Internet (Weare, 2002) was exploited through the online discussion groups, which enabled 'many to many' communication unlike the other two authorities where there was only a two-way communication between the council and the public.

Chapter 3 discussed the different democratic models that could be supported by the use of the Internet. The analysis of the websites showed that there are some applications that could be used to support deliberative models of democracy, such as online discussion forums in Harborough. There were also some online polls, which could support a direct democracy model. However, in none of the cases did the results of those consultations affected decisions directly. They were always considered as supplementary mechanisms to support the decision-making processes of councillors. It was believed that, ultimately, councillors were there to balance the outcomes emerging from all these channels with their own ideas. Although the websites did not signal much in terms of a shift towards other forms of democracy, neither were they used fully to support the representative model. This could have been achieved by enhancing communication between the public and the elected members through the extensive use of email, providing information on the website about local elections and candidates or advertising surgery hours. Only in Wellingborough did the Chief Executive mention that the council was checking whether it was legally possible to put party manifestos online so that people would not tell the council "we don't know what the candidates stand for" (February 2003). Limited use of the Internet, even within the parameters of representative democracy, could be related to

certain normative arguments against the use of the Internet, which are discussed below. It can also be explained by difficulties in institutional design, which will be discussed in Chapters 9 and 10.

Arguments against the use of the Internet for participation purposes

The first part of this chapter examined normative and practical concerns about participation and highlighted the different perspectives of the respondents. The purpose of this section is to consider whether these concerns are relevant for electronic participation and whether electronic participation introduces new worries or opportunities. This section also analyses how the general attitude towards participation affects perspectives on electronic participation. This will be discussed in more detail from an institutionalist perspective in the next chapter. Here, it is sufficient to summarise the concerns about the use of the Internet for participation. These concerns centred on four main themes:

- ⇒ Concerns about social exclusion and overrepresentation of certain groups
- ⇒ Concerns about losing the personal and face to face relation
- ⇒ Lack of demand from citizens for electronic participation
- ⇒ Lack of interest in participating

Social exclusion

Many studies warn that consultation based on certain technologies is likely to benefit certain groups who have access to those technologies (e.g. Pratchett et al, 2002).

Chapter 1 discussed the policy initiatives to tackle this issue of social exclusion at a national level. The case study evidence echoed these worries about the potential exclusion of certain groups. Chapter 3 suggested that the issue of exclusion is not only about having physical access to the Internet; it is also about having the skills and confidence to use it. There was awareness about this broader understanding of exclusion. Unsurprisingly, officers within the community development departments

were especially likely to highlight this problem as a possible barrier to the use of the Internet. The following comments from respondents in Box 7.1 support this finding.

BOX 7.1: Concerns about social exclusion

The problem is reinforcing social exclusion by creating an elite of customers who use this. That is a real danger. The rich people in Oadby who have their PCs and know how to use the system are already demanding; they can only get more demanding. So, there may be polarisation (emphasis added, OWBC, Chief Executive, July 2002).

We can put Internet access points all over the place, we can give people a chance to vote online, we can do all of that. That is great and I think we should. But actually if people don't have access or the self-confidence to use the equipment it doesn't reach to people that I need to reach (WBC, Head of Community and Cultural Development, November 2002).

You will never be at a stage where everything can be accessed by the Internet because you will always exclude someone...It is definitely a growing trend; I think it is a growing trend for middle classes (WBC, Community Development Manager, November 2002).

There was also awareness that people who need the council most are more likely to be excluded because they may lack access, skills or the confidence to use the Internet. Interviewees especially pointed to elderly, homeless people, and to council tenants as potentially excluded groups. Ironically, these are precisely the groups that tend to make the most use of council services. Box 7.2 brings together the opinions on this issue.

BOX 7.2: Further concerns about social exclusion

Also a lot of the people that use council services are all elderly and you know they are the last people to use it. So, I don't think it will have a miraculous impact on anything (WBC, Member e-champion, January 2003).

Most of the people who receive that service (housing) by definition are the poor, deprived, elderly. They don't have a chance. They can't set a video (OWBC, Director of Resources, January 2003)

People begging in the streets and living rough, they are not going to be using that and they are the sorts of people that you have to help more than anyone (WBC, Member e-champion, January 2003).

Some interviewees pointed to a more neglected concern about exclusion, which was related to the possible decline in human interaction. They noted that older people could become even more excluded if they do not go out. An officer reflected that, especially in rural areas, coming to the town and council enables people to meet and socialise. Commenting on the availability of online services and participation possibilities, she said “You could develop an area of social exclusion if you are not careful” (HDC, Community Development Manager, January 2003).

Unsurprisingly, Harborough was the location where fears of social exclusion were least widely expressed. In fact, the Internet was seen as a solution to social exclusion that arises from the rural nature of the district. This was the main motivation to apply for the pathfinder project and was raised many times in the council’s IEG statements. When the possibility of social exclusion was mentioned, a member who had to commute to his work everyday and did not have the opportunity to go to the council within the working hours said: “But they don’t see it from my perspective which is that when there is no service available electronically I am being excluded” (Interview, January 2003). Nevertheless, he suggested that old methods should still be kept and electronic means should not replace anything.

Face to face communication is better

There was a sense that the Internet helps the authorities to be more efficient, but that this benefit comes at the expense of certain other values. Many interviewees perceived themselves as being close to people. There was almost a sense of pride that people could contact them if they have a problem and that having this kind of relation is important for the kind of service they provide. This feeling was strongest in Oadby and Wigston, which physically was a very small council. Respondents frequently compared

their council with big 'faceless' ones and believed that "people appreciate the fact that they know the person they are ringing up" (Head of Corporate Services, January 2003). The prospect of losing this special relationship was not welcomed. An important theme throughout the interviews was that of 'getting the balance right' between the efficiency and care aspects of their work. Similar concerns were raised in other cases as well. Although respondents had suspicions about using the Internet, they also believed that it was an efficient way of dealing with the public. However, when it comes to participation, respondents were less convinced that it should be the way people participate. For example, an officer said that the use of the Internet could even decrease participation, because participation is about personal interaction and group working. Box 7.3 brings together expressions of these worries.

BOX 7.3: The value of personal or face-to-face communication

I actually think electronic communication diminishes not increases it [participation]. Because community participation is furthered by group working and personal interaction with people. Dragging people from peripheries and getting groups working. I think trying to foster a non-existent community spirit or sense of community via electronic means is impossible (OWBC, Director of Resources, January 2003).

We believe it is necessary to discuss the right balance between efficiency and customer care. One of our biggest advantage is we are seen as providing local, personal, friendly service and we don't want to be a remote call centre. That is not what people want and that is not what we are (OWBC, Chief Executive, July 2002).

I think it is sad to lose the personal touch. In due course, we will lose it and become sort of a faceless organisation. I don't like it and direct contact is important. People like to see a person, like to be reassured. I don't think e-government gives you reassurance; it states facts (HDC, Community Development Manager, January 2003).

If you don't use the *personal touch*, democracy goes out the window, doesn't it? When you go on the Internet you can find the information but you can't always get the answers you want (emphasis added, WBC, Community Development Manager, November 2002).

In all cases, respondents stressed that they did not want to replace any of the traditional methods of communication and that all they were trying to do was to add a new channel. In Harborough, the Chief Executive noted that while offering an additional

channel of communication, they are “not replacing any of the traditional ways” (January, 2003). Likewise an officer in Wellingborough noted:

For the sort of service we offer it is important for people to have direct, face to face contact as well as opening these other channels of communication (emphasis added, WBC, Head of Revenues, Services and Benefits, November 2002).

There is no demand for electronic participation

Another important barrier to the use of the Internet was related to a perceived lack of demand from citizens. There was a sense that they were considering these issues more as a result of government pressure than as a result of demand from the bottom.

Respondents believed that the Internet might be used by citizens to obtain information or to conduct certain transactions. However, they were less convinced that people would like to participate through this medium. Often they pointed at the results of their experiments on electronic participation, which would generate only a few responses. This was seen as evidence of a lack of demand. The views expressed in Box 7.4 reflect this issue.

BOX 7.4: Lack of demand for electronic participation

I don't think they are going to sit down typing in a discussion forum. I don't think any of my friends would think about that. I doubt very much that the use of community portals for that means of bringing in information for the council to take on board will be a major feature of the portals in near future (HDC, Leader, April 2003).

I don't think there is a demand out there. I think we are trying to stimulate demand. I don't get a sense from the community of a great desire to use the Internet as a mean to do anything other than business transactions (WBC, Chief Executive, February 2003).

I still think there are limited reasons why people would like to use our website and I don't think e-democracy is one of them. I don't think actually wanting to influence has come across at all. At the website, we invited people to comment on various things that we have done recently and it has been used very limited. They still prefer to write it down and pass it down to us. We had a Local Plan review; we had 250 written representations but nothing on the website (WBC, Chief Executive, February 2003).

We don't get people writing to us saying why don't you put this on email or website. We never get anything like that. We get lots of complaints about why you didn't empty the bins or sweep the streets. So it is probably being pushed from above (WBC, Community Development Manager, November 2002).

The belief that there was no demand for electronic participation was strongest in Wellingborough. The Chief Executive raised this point a number of times. When asked why the council still has plans concerning electronic participation, he replied that it was about leadership and trying to create a demand. Other respondents also mentioned that they were investing for the future rather than trying to meet an immediate demand. Interestingly, respondents did not comment on possible reasons why there was so little demand for, and response to, their electronic participation initiatives. Limited response rates may stem from practical considerations such as a lack of awareness of the existence of a consultation facility on the website.

People are not interested anyway

The first part of the chapter reviewed concerns about participation in general (without focusing on electronic participation) which included concerns about a lack of citizen demand. When the use of the Internet is added into the picture, respondents had even stronger views because they believed that the cost of online initiatives is so high that it cannot be justified given the existing level of demand. There was a sense that they were wasting money on something that will never happen. Especially in Oadby and Wigston, which was a small authority with one of the smallest budgets in the country, this was seen as a burden because they had to continue their offline consultation too. The webmaster said: "We have got to make it twice; both on paper and the Net; that increases cost. It is not a company; you have to ensure that everybody has a chance" (Interview, October 2002). Respondents also mentioned that just using the technology is not sufficient to generate interest; they also needed to think of ways to make issues more interesting and relevant. The following comments, in Box 7.5, reflect this concern.

BOX 7.5: Lack of demand for participation

So that is tonnes and tonnes of money on 'informing' people about the council. But they are not slightest bit bloody interested! As long as you get the bins emptied, the streets are reasonably clean, parks are pretty, you are safe on the streets, and if you are a council tenant, you get your repairs done. It is a bit like me worrying about the electricity board. I just want to turn on the light. Why should I worry about the processes of it (OWBC, Director of Resources, January 2003).

The voting in local elections is something like 30%. So the idea that everybody is sitting on the edges of their seats waiting for the council to tell them something or they can't wait to get all these wonderful information is entirely a false picture (WBC, Member e-champion, January 2003).

I think you have got to use every means you have to get people participate. But they have got to have interest in the subject. It is making the subject interesting and relevant (WBC, Head of Housing Operations and Policy, January 2003).

In addition to these four major themes - fear of exclusion, preference of face-to-face relations, perceived lack of demand for participation and electronic participation - there were also concerns about technical and legal matters such as digital authentication, technical risks, and data protection. Officers with IT roles and those who were highly involved in the operational aspects of online projects raised these points in particular. Looking at the empirical evidence highlights some major themes that cut across cases, but it also reveals differences between cases and between actors. While Wellingborough and Oadby and Wigston were cautious about using the Internet, Harborough perceived it as an opportunity. While officers within community developments departments and some service departments who had close relations with people (such as housing, benefits) had concerns about the exclusion of certain groups, officers within IT departments were more concerned with technical barriers.

The first part of the Chapter reviewed concerns about participation *per se* without specific reference to the use of the Internet for participation purposes. The next task is to analyse:

- (a) whether the arguments/concerns about electronic participation echo those general concerns;
- (b) whether electronic participation introduces new arguments and concerns.

Comparing the concerns about electronic participation with concerns about *participation per se* demonstrates that the major issue, which was about exclusion, is *reproduced* in the case of electronic participation. This echoes the worries about 'digital divide' among scholars and policy makers (Dijk, 2000; Bonfadelli, 2002). Throughout the interviews, there was awareness about inequalities arising from simple access issues and the broader related implications. The IEG statements also highlight the danger of social exclusion. The fact that this concern was greatest in Wellingborough is not surprising considering that it was the most deprived location among the three cases. The cost of consultation, which was already a concern, became an even bigger issue with electronic participation. Councils often believed that their expenses on electronic consultation could not be justified because there was very little demand and response. They also raised the point that, in order to ensure equality, they had to retain traditional methods of consultation alongside any innovations. This necessitated the running of parallel methods, which in turn increased their costs yet further. Only in Harborough was electronic participation seen as a cheaper mode of consultation, both because the council had joint arrangements with other councils through the Welland Partnership and also because online participation was perceived as cheaper than trying to reach communities out in rural parts of the district. Moreover, the council accessed large sums of funding specifically granted for experimenting with electronic service delivery and consultation.

In addition to these familiar concerns, electronic participation opened a normative debate about the value and desirability of mechanisms replacing face-to-face communication between the council and the citizens. This was a particularly important theme in Oadby and Wigston and Wellingborough. However, even in Harborough, the council most eager to make use of the Internet, the importance of face-to-face contact was emphasised a number of times. The potential for using the Internet for delivering services and informing people was considered *efficient* despite certain problems. However, the use of the Internet for participation purposes was seen as neither realistic (people will not use it), nor desirable (people do not like it). That said, when we consider that only a few of the existing consultation initiatives are in fact based on face-to-face communication, it becomes difficult to understand why the councils are so

concerned about maintaining those relations. When the respondents were talking about methods of consultation, they did not prioritise face-to-face methods (except for some actors such as officers within community development departments). This begs the question of why they suddenly began to value face-to-face consultation when we started talking about electronic participation. It could be related to perceptions of technology as efficient but unfriendly. It could also have some ceremonial reasoning, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Scope for enhancing participation by using the Internet

The research evidence revealed a perception that the scope for enhancing participation by using the Internet is limited. This is related both to the general limitations for enhancing participation from the top and to specific problems concerning the use of the Internet for this purpose. General limitations have been discussed in the first part and they are mostly related to a perceived lack of interest on the part of citizens. Lack of interest was explained by the suggested irrelevance of issues, apathy, and structural problems such as the working of politics and local government. Although the Internet is praised for introducing convenient modes of participation, the research evidence suggests that it is not sufficient to overcome structural problems. Commenting on electronic voting and its potential impact on turnout levels, an officer reflected on the working of representative democracy and local government:

I don't think it is purely an issue of convenient voting methods that is stopping people get involved. Perhaps local government and government in general shouldn't just be about voting, putting your trust to somebody you have elected. There should be more accountability than that, but I think the government is putting a lot into this. I just don't feel that unless people get actual influence on a day-to-day basis there is going to be that much more interest in the working of the local council (OWBC, Director of Community Services, April 2003).

Even when there was a belief in the scope for enhancing participation, the Internet was not usually perceived as the right medium largely because of inequalities of access, skills and confidence to use the Internet. As discussed before, there was a high level of awareness that the people who may need the council most are also the least likely to have access, skills or the confidence to use the Internet. These concerns were strongest

in Wellingborough and Oadby and Wigston. In both cases, important decision-makers such as chief executives and directors raised such criticisms on many occasions. The most ironic case was Wellingborough where one of the member e-champions demonstrated the strongest views against not only electronic participation but also participation in general.

Despite limitations, there was also some belief that the Internet could be used especially in rural areas to attract people “who would not be bothered in going to a forum meeting in a November night” (HDC, Democratic Services Officer, January 2003).

Unsurprisingly, this was only raised in Harborough. The Harborough Chief Executive was excited about possibilities such as “engaging through the Internet like the video-conferencing and web cast” and that “a local member could actually web cast to his own ward” (HDC, January 2003). Although this is technologically possible, it did not make sense to all respondents. In fact, a Director in Oadby and Wigston was very surprised at such experiments in a neighbouring council: “Stupid things like the council next door to where I live is actually putting the council meetings on the web. You have to be joking! I only go to council meetings because I am paid to do it. They are dreadful” (OWBC interview, January 2003).

CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on the case study findings, this chapter has demonstrated that the potential of the Internet to enhance participation is limited for a number of reasons. First, the Internet was mostly seen as an information provision and service delivery tool rather than a participation medium. There was awareness among interviewees of the possibilities for electronic voting but much less awareness about its potential use for broader participation. Second, the scope for enhancing participation from the top was limited by a perception of citizens’ lack of interest. Third, there were certain practical and normative arguments against participation *per se*. The chapter has demonstrated that attitudes towards electronic participation build on those concerns. It showed that the use of the Internet also introduced new concerns such as the worries about losing personal contact with citizens. Although the attitudes towards the use of the Internet were mainly

positive because of efficiency gains, there was also a belief that it should not replace traditional channels, and especially face-to-face contact. Many interviewees valued local government on the basis of localness, ease of contact and the value of maintaining personal relations with citizens. Hence, feelings about the Internet were mixed: there were feelings of enthusiasm because of its novelty, feelings of distrust because of the possibilities of technical failure, and feelings of dislike because of its impersonal nature. The conclusions of the chapter can be analysed in relation to four categories.

Social Exclusion

By far the most important concern about participation has been the potential for giving voice to the same people and excluding others. There was a high level of awareness that consultation efforts do not reach everyone. In this respect, the limitations of participation were mostly considered in conjunction with 'equality'. This echoes Beetham's (1996) double principles of democracy (popular control and political equality), which were discussed in Chapter 2. There was acknowledgement that increased participation can be a threat to democracy when it is not distributed equally among different sections of society. Frequently, respondents highlighted the lack of participation and attendance in their consultation events by the same people. This was in line with major studies on political participation, which confirm that most of the existing participation comes from a small but active segment of society (Parry et al, 1992). In some cases, this very fact may become a barrier to the design and implementation of participation initiatives. However, there was also a belief that there may be scope for intervention aimed at countering some of those inequalities. This was mostly done by using different methods of consultation to reach different groups and by developing more targeted programmes for capacity building and training.

The relation between the Internet and democracy can only be realised when the Internet can be used to enhance the volume and distribution of participation. In terms of enhancing equality of participation, the research evidence showed that the use of the Internet could ameliorate some forms of inequality in participation by reaching out to rural areas or people with disabilities. However, the use of the Internet also seems to

introduce other kinds of inequalities: inequalities of access, skills and confidence to use the technology. In terms of enhancing participation, structural barriers on the citizens' side and barriers originating from the national political environment also limit the scope for the Internet's contribution.

Electronic participation and different models of democracy

The case study research also revealed important findings concerning the relationship between participation and different models of democracy. Whereas some elected members were concerned that direct participation channels between the council and citizens were unnecessary because they are elected to represent those people, other officers commented that participation is necessary to complement the representative democracy because elections every four years are not sufficient to ensure representativeness. Their comments follow Beetham (1996), who suggests that there must be more channels between the elections in order to maintain a continuous flow of interaction and ensure responsiveness and representativeness. However, for some elected members, councils' consultation efforts appeared as a potential threat to their role as representatives. Different views highlighted by members and officers echoed an important question within democratic theory: how much participation? The tension between officers ('we are double-checking how representative they are') and councillors ('they are getting behind my back') reflects the major tension between representative and participatory models of democracy. However, it should be said that some elected members valued citizen participation as a means of balancing representatives' views, which can sometimes be parochial or prejudiced.

The research revealed some findings in relation to developments towards deliberative and direct models of democracy. Despite the huge literature on the possibilities of enhancing direct democracy through the Internet (see, for example, Budge, 1996), there has not been much development towards this model in the three cases. The concept of e-democracy equated to electronic voting for many respondents. However, there was no suggestion that electronic voting could be used in order to stage regular referendums. Again, this was an important departure from the academic debates, which centre on

direct democracy models. Rather, the Internet was seen as a mechanism to enhance the most important institution of representative democracy: elections. Elected members in particular raised concerns about legal, security and privacy issues that could arise with the use of electronic voting. There was a strong belief that electronic voting should not cause any damage to the reputation of electoral institutions.

In terms of deliberative democracy, there were some experiments in Harborough in the shape of online discussion groups. However, their impact was very limited especially because of low take up levels. The fact that only a few people participated in discussions led to some scepticism about their value as a discussion platform. Nevertheless, the 'lollypop lady' example shows that there may be some scope for citizens' deliberation to be taken into account in decisions. The fact that there were few developments towards direct and deliberative models of democracy does not mean that the Internet was used to its full extent to support the representative model. For example, councillors' use of email was limited and when they did use email, it was often to communicate with officers and to save print and postage costs.

E-government versus e-democracy purposes

The case study research revealed that e-government purposes, such as providing better services and increasing internal efficiency were considered as more important than e-democracy (for operationalisation of e-government and e-democracy, see Chapter 4). This can be explained by five factors. First, there was a perception that there was no demand from citizens for the use of the Internet except for conducting online transactions. It was also believed that putting services online could attract people who would not otherwise be interested. Second, local authorities tended to see their role primarily as a service delivery organisation rather than a democratic body. Therefore, there was a preference to spend public money on 'tangible' benefits, particularly in the form of electronic services. Third, there were some suspicions about the value of the Internet as the most appropriate medium for generating participation. This was related both to the fear of social exclusion and to the belief that participation should be about human interaction and meeting face to face. Fourth, there were some signs that e-

democracy could be seen as the next stage after achieving e-government goals. Therefore, authorities felt that they should concentrate on improving their technology infrastructure and providing basic services before they could start planning how they might use the Internet for democratic purposes. The fifth factor was related to the national agenda. As discussed in Chapter 3, local authorities had to meet targets set by the government requiring the electronic provision of all their services by the end of 2005. Therefore, there was a rush to meet the targets, which prevented local authorities from finding their own ways of experimenting with the Internet for democratic purposes. Harborough was different in that respect, since the authority was selected specifically to experiment with the concept of a community portal which included electronic consultation and deliberation.

What is striking is that, often, developments regarding e-government were seen as e-democracy applications. This is partly because in practice these two agendas have been driven together as discussed before in Chapter 3. This also echoes Hagen's (2000) claim that "it is the characteristic of British work on the 'information polity' that they mix 'electronic service delivery' with issues of 'electronic democracy capabilities'" (p. 61). This research suggests that perhaps British academic work tends to mix service delivery and democracy because in fact they *are* mixed. This mix could be explained by a consumerist democracy approach. So, for example, by opening new channels (hence choice) of service delivery and better services, the Internet is perceived to be contributing to democracy. Similarly, the websites were often perceived as an alternative 24/7 office that customers could choose to use whenever they wanted. Going back to the models of democracy developed in Chapter 2, it is possible to argue that there were some developments supporting a consumer democracy model with the use of the Internet.

The paradox of the Internet and 'local' participation

Chapter 3 suggested that the relationship between the properties of the Internet and the concept of the 'local' gave rise to a paradox. The chapter highlighted the capacity of the Internet to connect people from anywhere *regardless of distance* and raised some questions about its value for enhancing local participation. This paradox was apparent

especially in Oadby and Wigston where respondents believed that their biggest asset was the close relationship with local citizens. The paradox between the properties of the Internet and local participation became clearer when Oadby and Wigston was compared with Harborough. Comparing Harborough (260 square miles) with Oadby and Wigston (9 square miles) and their attitudes towards the Internet revealed how geography can play a role in shaping attitudes. Whilst in Harborough, the Internet was seen as a solution to many of their problems, in Oadby and Wigston it was seen simply as unnecessary.

The chapter concludes that there is a large degree of continuity between attitudes towards participation *per se* and towards electronic participation. The findings showed that, instead of triggering a revolutionary change and introducing radical models of democracy, the Internet is being adapted within the parameters of representative democracy and within the usual workings of individual local authorities. The way the electronic participation models develop is highly influenced by existing norms, ideas and patterns of behaviour. However, this is not to ignore intentional efforts to design new institutions associated with electronic participation (see Chapters 9 and 10). The next chapter analyses, from an institutionalist perspective, the process by which strategies for electronic participation develop.

CHAPTER 8

ANALYSING THE FINDINGS FROM CASE STUDIES: INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter concluded that attitudes towards electronic participation build on attitudes towards participation *per se*. This chapter and the subsequent two chapters explain why this is the case. As the research propositions in Chapter 5 suggested, the strategy of a local authority in terms of using the Internet for citizen participation develops within the constraints and opportunities of an institutional environment. Therefore, the Internet's use is shaped according to the existing operating procedures and values of local government, and its participatory potential depends not only on technical but also on political and institutional limits. Local authorities operate within an institutional environment, which may or may not support the development of electronic citizen participation. This is to suggest that the existence of the Internet does not automatically lead to an increase in citizen participation. The institutional environment is important in shaping the preferences of its actors, in creating opportunities for them and in imposing limits on their behaviour. More crucially, it is within the institutional environment that the very meanings and perceptions of participation and the Internet develop.

Drawing upon the concepts developed in Chapter 5, the institutional context of the three cases will be analysed in order to find answers to the following questions:

- ⇒ How do local authorities' attitudes towards citizen participation and the Internet develop within their institutional environment?
- ⇒ How do the internal and wider institutional environments interact in developing strategies about using the Internet for participation purposes?
- ⇒ How can we explain the similarities and differences between local authorities in terms of their understanding of electronic participation?

The first part of the chapter engages with the task of operationalising the concept of an institution in order to clarify its use in this research. The second part focuses on explaining the institutional context that exists *within* local authorities. The third part analyses the role of the wider institutional environment *around* local authorities. The purpose is to explain how the internal and wider institutional environments interact in the development of meanings, perceptions, norms and strategies. The chapter also aims to analyse the processes of isomorphism and variation between local authorities by using concepts from institutional theory.

OPERATIONALISING INSTITUTIONS

As discussed in Chapter 5, institutions are the rules that are *agreed upon* and followed by agents either explicitly or tacitly. They are *shared* among actors and they can be identified and explained by actors. They are different from broader customs and personal habits. Although this definition is helpful in distinguishing institutions at a conceptual level, there may still be empirical issues in terms of operationalising and measuring institutions. The problem of operationalising is exacerbated by the fact that the definition of institutions may vary depending on different versions of institutionalism. This research mainly draws upon normative and sociological institutionalisms. It is useful to delimit the definition and to exclude other definitions such as those offered within the rational choice version of institutionalism.

According to the normative version of institutionalism, mostly advocated by March and Olsen (1984, 1989), socially mediated values and normative frameworks structure choices. Actors conform not because it serves their narrowly defined individual interests, but because it is expected of them. March and Olsen (1989) explain this by distinguishing a ‘logic of appropriateness’ from a ‘logic of instrumentality’ which is central to rational choice theorists.

According to sociological institutionalists, compliance occurs because other types of behaviour are inconceivable; routines are followed because they are taken for granted as

'the way we do things' (Scott, 1995). Unlike the normative theorists who focus on the constraining force of norms, these theorists point to the importance of guidelines for sense making and choosing meaningful actions. Meyer and Rowan (1977) introduced institutional analysis with symbolic elements capable of affecting behaviour. This approach emphasises the creation of meaning and perceptions in organisations. On this view, organisations use symbols to define themselves and to create desired patterns of behaviour. From a normative perspective, institutions tell actors what the appropriate behaviour would be in any situation. From a sociological perspective, membership in an institution creates 'perceptual frames' (Peters, 1999a, p. 103) for sense making. For both the normative and sociological approaches, therefore, enforcement mechanisms have neither to be explicit nor external; they are *internalised*. In short, institutions in this research are understood as

- Shared and agreed upon rules which,
- Constrain and guide behaviour through a logic of appropriateness or taken for granted behaviours, which
- Provide meaning and legitimacy to social behaviour, and which are
- Embedded in and supported by certain norms and values

Having operationalised the concept of institution for the purposes of this research, the next section analyses the institutional environment *within* the three local authorities.

ANALYSING THE INTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The strategy of local authorities in relation to the use of the Internet develops within the institutional context of each authority. This context has its own internal dynamics, political complexities, patterns of behaviour and formal and informal rules that develop over time. How these institutions emerge is an empirical question. In this study, the main concern was not that of finding the causes underlying the emergence of institutions. Rather, the research aimed to understand how institutions affect actors' ways of thinking and specifically their strategies for using the Internet for citizen

participation. This is not to dismiss actors as passive agents. The role of actors will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Referring to an institutional context does not imply the existence of a coherent unit. As discussed in Chapter 5, “rules are seen as producing variation and deviation as well as conformity and standardisation; this is because there are always areas of ambiguity in the interpretation and application of rules (not least because individuals vary in terms of their own values and experiences), and because rules are adapted by actors seeking to make sense of changing environments” (Lowndes, 2002a, p. 105). Nevertheless, the case study research revealed that there were some institutions affecting behaviour and strategy, some of which cut across the three cases and some of which were relevant for individual cases. Identifying these institutions is important because they affect both the worldview of actors in general, and their strategy in using the Internet in particular.

As discussed in Chapter 5, institutions can be consciously designed and clearly specified as Constitutions, Best Value Performance Plans, and Partnership agreements. They may also be informal rules associated with positive patterns of behaviour such as social inclusion, efficiency, and citizen participation, or negative patterns of behaviour such as exclusion of certain groups and lack of communication among departments.

The research demonstrated that values and norms associated with consumer democracy and representative democracy were important in shaping the strategies of the three local authorities. Consumer democracy and representative democracy can be defined as institutions because they are both sets of values and norms that constrain and guide behaviour. Examples of values embedded in representative democracy are equality, accountability, participation and responsiveness. These values are carried through practices and routines such as equal and free elections. They are enforced by a logic of appropriateness. For example, policy makers are constrained in the sense that they cannot initiate policies that would systematically exclude certain groups.

Examples of values embedded in consumer democracy are customer care, freedom of choice and high quality services. These values are carried through certain routines and

practices such as complaint schemes, service satisfaction surveys and other market techniques.

Analysing the three cases reveals that each has a strong sense of responsibility for providing high quality services; this was most obvious in Oadby and Wigston. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Internet was mainly seen as a tool that could be used to provide services in a better way. As such, it could be argued that norms and values associated with consumer democracy constituted a barrier to the use of the Internet for participation purposes. Actors were constrained in the sense that their understanding of what can be done with the Internet was highly shaped by a strong service delivery orientation. Associated with this service delivery orientation, all cases have demonstrated a high degree of departmentalism, which was also a barrier to the development of corporate approaches to using the Internet for participation purposes. The dominance of consumer democracy, particularly in Oadby and Wigston, was also reflected in common practices such as mystery shopper exercises, complaint and service satisfaction schemes and consultation groups based on specific services. Actors' understanding of the Internet was constrained by their perception of the Internet as a tool for offering an additional channel, and hence 'choice', for providing services. The website of the council was perceived as an alternative 24/7 office that customers can choose to use whenever they want.

The research also demonstrated that in all cases, norms and values embedded in and supported by representative democracy played an important role in the development of new institutions for enhancing participation including the use of the Internet for this purpose. The most important value in this sense was 'equality'. There was a high level of awareness about issues concerning equality. The most important normative argument against participation was related to social exclusion. Actors were constrained by a logic of appropriateness that enforced patterns of thought like the following: "we have to include everyone; however, electronic participation may lead to the exclusion of certain groups; hence, it may not be appropriate". However, participation was also considered a value for democracy. Some actors believed that it was 'part and parcel' of their job. It had a strong normative appeal. Therefore, in a sense, there was a clash between two values embedded in the representative democracy. From an institutionalist perspective,

this is not surprising. On the contrary, the new institutionalist perspective recognises that actors may have to choose between different logics of appropriateness. In terms of using the Internet for participation purposes, officers and elected members are faced with conflicting values, which they try to accommodate in their strategies.

Representative democracy provided a framework within which actors decided what was desirable and feasible with the use of the Internet. Because participation was associated with elections and voting (as opposed, let us say, to a grassroots mode of participation such as protest), actors' understanding of electronic participation was almost limited to e-voting. The fact that participation was perceived within the parameters of representative democracy was also a barrier to its use for radical models of democracy. For example, although the Internet offers online referendum possibilities, this application was not mentioned once, either by officers or by councillors.

Unsurprisingly, the use of the Internet for electronic voting was raised many times by both officers and councillors as a way of using the new technologies in enhancing citizen participation. This was related to the fact that referendums are not part of the established context either in the UK in general or in the British local government in particular. Nevertheless, there were some developments, for instance, the online discussion forums in Harborough, which may support a deliberative model of democracy. However, these structures are not followed by changes in behaviour. Their level of institutionalisation will be discussed in the next two chapters.

Formal Structures and Organisational Stories

Over time, organisations develop legitimised vocabularies, myths and stories that become guidelines for choosing meaningful actions. The case study research suggested that 'innovation' in Harborough, 'partnership' in Wellingborough and being 'small and approachable' in Oadby and Wigston were key symbolic elements that affected behaviour. This does not necessarily mean that Harborough was *really* an innovative council or that Oadby and Wigston were *actually* approachable. Equally, however, the existence of these vocabularies need not mean that they were simply used as part of the rhetoric. What is important is that these myths and stories have a symbolic value. There

is agreement between actors that they are innovative as a council (Harborough) or they work in partnership with others (Wellingborough). Actors are also aware that they are expected to behave accordingly.

In Harborough, 'innovation' was acknowledged by nearly all actors as their most important asset as a council. Respondents emphasised this through expressions such as 'forerunner', 'pathfinder', 'being at the cutting edge' and 'forward thinking' (various interviews). The Welland partnership was seen as an obvious manifestation of the innovative culture. The council was willing to take risks and experiment with using the new technologies for both service delivery and consultation. There was a sense of pride among most of the respondents that as a council they have achieved more than was expected of them. An officer described this with the phrase '*punching above your weight*' (Democratic Services Team, Harborough).

In Wellingborough, the dominant values were 'partnership' and a concern for the 'economic wellbeing of the borough'. As will be discussed in relation to locality (see below), the borough was not a wealthy place and there was a sense that the council had a role to play in increasing economic wellbeing. When asked about what distinguishes the council from others, the Leader replied 'I think the partnerships we have and the relationships we have with a whole range of people'. In the same vein, the Chief Executive explained the importance of partnership for the locality and the council as follows:

[Partnership is important]. *Because we can't do it on our own. But we do have an idea about what we want to see. We want to see Wellingborough with a good solid and capable commercial sector...People not going down to London to work everyday but having their jobs here...As a council we can't do that because we are too small. But we have that vision. The way to achieve it is knocking on the doors of everybody else who has got a say on how it is delivered and getting them to direct their vision and attention to do it (Chief Executive).*

There was also a strong sense of a break from the Conservative controlled past of the council. Officers and Labour councillors frequently commented that there has been a "tremendous change from the dictatorial past" (Head of Revenues and Benefits). Many respondents suggested that there was a strict culture within the council, which also

impinged on the council's relations with citizens. The council, according to some officers, was 'out of touch' (Quality and Performance Review Manager) for a long time. After the change in political control, the council went through changes in management including the setting up of a Community Development Department to establish an ongoing relation with local people. There was a sense of pride about what had been achieved since the change in political control.

However, there were some signals hinting that legacies of the past could still be relevant. Two points were especially important. There was a sense of distrust of politics, exemplified by distrust of politicians and active participants. As discussed in the previous chapter, officers wanted to have their own channels of communication with citizens to double check councillors' views. This distrust was relevant for organised pressure groups too. Such groups were seen as people 'with an agenda'. The second signal was related to the comparisons made with the private sector. On many occasions, officers made direct comparisons with banks and insurance companies and they commented that they have to make better use of the technology like those companies. These two points have hinted at a legacy of consumerist democracy, which was also reflected in the methods of consultation that Wellingborough used to rely on (see previous chapter). The significance of this legacy is that the Internet was seen mostly as a tool for the delivery of services online just like banks and insurance companies, or to promote the locality for business purposes. The website of the Wellingborough council had a separate section on business differentiating it from the websites of the other two cases. In short, the use of the Internet for participation purposes was secondary to these purposes. However, the establishment of the Community Development Department as a formal structure, which was followed by the creation of new institutions such as the citizen panel and the rural forum, inaugurated a process of change. This will be discussed in the next two chapters.

In Oadby and Wigston, being a small and approachable council was a very important part of the self-perception of the council. The Leader said they had certainly proved that 'small is beautiful'. Being small was not only about physical conditions; rather, it was part of the council's identity. Being close to people was perceived to be so important

that there was a fear that the Internet might challenge that value. Reflecting a very common claim within the council, an officer noted that “people appreciate the fact that they know the person they are ringing up. They feel they can rely on him to get things done” (Best Value Officer). These kinds of comments signal an old-fashioned public service ethos. The understanding of participation in Oadby and Wigston was limited to providing information and services or handling complaints. Although many respondents raised concerns about losing their special relation with citizens as a result of using the Internet, the research could not reveal much evidence of such relations. It appeared that ‘small and approachable’ had become a myth for ‘loose coupling’ (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) of the council’s actual activities from the symbols that actors use to legitimise their behaviour. In using these symbols, actors justified their existence and provided it with meaning.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) suggest that a formal structure may be used for symbolic purposes. Hence, relations between actual everyday activities and behaviours of organisational members and formal structures may be negligible. A good example was the youth portal²⁵, which was launched with the initiative of the Chief Executive. Although the youth portal existed as a formal structure, it was not part of the council’s daily work as an internalised structure. It was not seen as a legitimate part of their job especially for the lower level actors who perceived it as an imposition from the Chief Executive. Organisations may also invest in expenditure for ceremonial purposes. In Harborough, the council provided computers in the council foyer as a means of supplying public access for people who cannot access the Internet at home or work. However, the gesture was almost meaningless because if people were to arrive at the council offices, they would presumably speak to someone instead of using the computers.

However, this is not to suggest that formal structures are always decoupled from organisations’ daily activities. A certain formal structure, over time, may gain its own life and legitimacy such that, after a sufficient amount of time, it may be accepted and taken for granted. For example, the Welland Partnership in Harborough started to ‘gain

²⁵ The youth portal example was used to make another point in the previous chapter. However, here, it is used to illustrate how as a formal structure it is decoupled from the daily work of the organisation.

a life of its own' (Information Systems Manager) and to affect behaviour by introducing new norms. For example, many interviewees suggested that standards have increased after Welland and that they are now 'expected' to deliver better services. The council initially started online service delivery with the Planning Department, but gradually other departments had to improve their sections on the website and deliver the same standards. Therefore, Welland as a formal structure led to changes in behaviour by introducing a more competitive culture between different departments. Nevertheless, there were also suggestions that Welland was not owned by the majority of members and officers (Scrutiny Research Officer). According to a young Liberal Democrat member, it was a 'dilution of local democracy'. Hence, for at least some actors, it lacked legitimacy, which is a necessity for the institutionalisation of new structures as will be discussed in Chapter 10.

In short, changes in formal structures may not always be followed by changes in behaviour. Sometimes organisations may use myths and symbolic elements to decouple their daily activities from the formal structures and legitimise their behaviour by using a ceremonial vocabulary. However, there are some occasions on which formal structures may be followed by changes in norms and patterns of behaviour. The constraints of institutional design will be discussed in more detail in the next two chapters. Having analysed the role of the internal institutional environment in shaping strategies for using the Internet, the next part analyses the role of the wider institutional environment.

WIDER INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Local authorities are connected to their environment and they respond to legitimate pressures and needs from the outside. However, analysing the role of the environment is not only important for understanding how local authorities respond to different needs. More importantly, the environment helps local authorities to form their identities, to make sense of ambiguous situations and to decide what constitutes appropriate behaviour. By defining appropriate behaviour, the wider institutional environment may lead to homogenisation between local authorities in terms of their attitude towards participation and their strategies for using the Internet. However, locality may work in

the opposite direction and lead local authorities to adopt different strategies. For the purposes of this research, the wider institutional environment is considered in relation to three levels: central government, the local government field and the locality.

Central Government: Coercive and normative isomorphism

Coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) results from both formal and informal pressures exerted on organisations by other organisations upon which they are dependent. In the local government context, local authorities are dependent on central government for resources. Hence, government affects their strategy through the distribution of resources. It supports the creation and maintenance of new institutions. Harborough, for example, was supported through a Pathfinder scheme, which aimed to experiment with creating new institutions, particularly online consultation and service delivery. An officer e-champion in Wellingborough said, “the funding opportunities that now come up from the central government are intimately linked to e-government. So *we have been forced to think more about it*” (Officer e-champion). The Chief Executive in Oadby and Wigston also acknowledged the importance of government funding in their strategy:

The government has given us the money to try to move this forward and if it hadn't been for that we would not be moving forward perhaps as strongly as we are (Chief Executive, Oadby and Wigston).

Government's demand is a major factor for us because in terms of priorities our politicians would not prefer to spend money on this. They would prefer to spend money on *visible* things that people can see and enjoy (Chief Executive, Oadby and Wigston).

Obtaining exemption from further inspections is also perceived as a good incentive. The Chief Executive in Wellingborough commented that if the council is graded as an excellent authority in CPA²⁶, the ‘greatest joy’ that this will give him is that he will not have to spend his time with inspectors and auditors. However, government's influence cannot be explained simply by ‘resource dependence’ (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978).

²⁶ Comprehensive Performance Assessment, See Chapter 2

More crucially, the government plays an important role by setting the rules within which local authorities operate. The government passes legislation, provides incentives for certain practices and punishes non-compliance. Written regulations (formal rules) require local authorities to establish new structures, to create new roles, and to adopt new patterns of behaviour. The government requirement in relation to IEG statements prompted local authorities to make the necessary arrangements. New roles such as member and officer e-champions were created and the distribution of roles within the authority has changed. Reflecting on these changes, an ICT Services Manager commented that the “infrastructure has changed dramatically in the last three years...the size of the section has increased from two to nine people. *It is all about addressing the e-government agenda*” (Oadby and Wigston). There have been other structural changes as well. In Harborough, a specific group working on e-government issues was established. In Wellingborough, a co-ordination team for all their consultation activities was set up. However, these changes may or may not be followed by changes in individual behaviour. As one interviewee noted “it is about changing people’s hearts and minds not about structures” (Head of Community and Cultural Development, Wellingborough). It may be easy to change institutions at a formal level, but new institutions may not be taken for granted.

The impact of the government does not have to be targeted, direct and coercive. This impact can also take place through the creation of values and norms that local authorities feel they must comply with (normative isomorphism). These values and norms are embedded in several policies. As discussed in Chapter 4, the importance of the ‘modernisation agenda’ is not limited to a policy influence. The diffusion of values such as ‘modern’, ‘efficient’, ‘partnership’, ‘participation’ and ‘social inclusion’ as the desired and dominant values informs guidelines for local authorities. Chapter 2 and 3 discussed the view that among those values, efficiency and providing high quality services have been the most dominant. The case study evidence demonstrated that local authorities use the Internet mostly for providing online services. It appears that the national political environment and its dominant narrative based on e-government purposes has become a barrier to the use of the Internet for democratic purposes. This is not to deny the significance of the government’s policies encouraging participation

outcomes, which are discussed in Chapter 2 and 3. Reflecting on these policies, many interviewees emphasised that citizen participation has become an important part of their job. They described this as a ‘complete change in thinking’ or ‘change in local government ethos’ that has taken place only in the last few years. The following comments highlight the importance of government regulations in shaping the authorities’ approach to consultation.

The idea of consultation is quite new. It is a bit like e-government. I don’t think people have really thought about consulting people until about two years ago. I think it all originates from Best Value (Officer e-champion, Wellingborough).

When I arrived here, it (consultation) was completely unheard of. You wouldn’t have dreamt of consulting people. That was for us to decide; that is what we were paid to do. *The change has been a complete change in thinking.* And it has only been in the last five years perhaps. There has been a huge change in local government generally (Member of Democratic Services Team, Harborough).

Although citizen participation constitutes an important part of the democratic renewal programme of the government, the case studies revealed that the potential for using the Internet for democratic purposes appears to have been marginalized *vis-à-vis* managerial and service delivery-oriented purposes.

The local governance field: Mimetic and normative isomorphism

Local authorities operate within an organisational field consisting of other players such as other local councils, professional associations, consultant companies, and partners. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), an ‘organisational field’ represents those organisations that, taken together, constitute a recognised area of institutional life. The concept of an ‘organisational field’ is different from the concept of a ‘network’ in the sense that the local governance field as an organisational field encompasses various networks of organisations. Within this field, local authorities have formal and informal relations with other players, and they reflect each other’s values and structures. They observe each other, compare themselves with successful authorities, and influence each other, directly or indirectly, through meetings, partnerships and peer organisations. All these interactions contribute to the creation of various norms about what is right and

what should be done in terms of e-participation. This leads to ‘normative isomorphism’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

The local governance field plays an important role both in learning from other players and in the diffusion of certain rules and practices. *Learning* is an important element for local authorities. Institutional theory also regards learning as a principal means of adaptation. The basic argument is that institutions identify and then adapt to changing circumstances in their environment through a process of learning (Peters, 1999a). Actors within local government try to minimise the cost of learning by observing similar authorities or through umbrella organisations such as the Local Government Association. Local councils try to find tried and tested solutions for common problems to reduce the uncertainties involved in experimenting with new practices. This leads to what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify as ‘mimetic isomorphism’. In Harborough, the project of community portals was built upon an example in a neighbouring council, Rutland. An officer commented: “This was really building on work already being done in Rutland and using that experience in other authorities” (Information Systems Manager). Commenting on their decision to launch community portals similar to Harborough, the Chief Executive and the Leader in Wellingborough noted the following:

I think we looked at what Welland has done and regarded it as being successful. *They have done something which is good and why shouldn't we build on that?* We are happy to do that (Chief Executive, Wellingborough).

It is a matter of looking elsewhere. We don't pretend that we are experts. We look at what advice is given. *We look at where there is good practice.* In that particular issue, within Welland group there was good practice (Leader, Wellingborough).

The second aspect of the local government field is to provide a base for the *diffusion of certain rules and structures*. The social relations of a local authority play an important role not only in providing information about what is going on in other organisations, but also, and more importantly, in constituting, over time, the very identity of the authority. Through these relations, councils make sense of what is expected of them and what is modern, efficient or right. In Harborough, the local council had strong relations with its

partners within the Welland as well as connections with the government departments due to its Pathfinder status. Wellingborough was mostly connected to the county council and its neighbours. On the other hand, Oadby and Wigston was more closed and isolated in terms of having these kinds of networks. The council was more interested in being a 'community type of council' (Director of Resources). These relations had an important role in the values and strategies of the three councils. While Harborough was oriented towards innovation and 'putting itself on the national map' (Chief Executive), Oadby and Wigston had a less ambitious approach. This confirms the finding of Newman et al (2000), which suggests that interagency partnerships generate a more outward-looking approach and a greater inclination for innovation.

The diffusion of certain practices and norms is further accelerated by organisations such as SOCITM and IDEA. An officer e-champion acknowledged that the concept of transactional websites has been 'pushed' by SOCITM. According to Brooks (2000), this is a form of 'implicit regulation' (p. 599) in which the central government makes use of third party agencies in constructing and disseminating good practice models. The case study demonstrated that these agencies play a role in the creation and maintenance of particular practices such as peer reviews. These practices in turn lead to the diffusion of certain norms. For example, in Wellingborough, a successful IDEA peer review was mentioned several times by respondents. The practice of peer review gave legitimacy to what they had been doing as a council and conceivably contributed to the diffusion of certain norms by influencing actors' understanding of what constitutes appropriate behaviour.

Locality: Forces for variation

Institutions derive a good deal of their structure, their meaning, and their logic of appropriateness from the society from which they are formed (March and Olsen, 1989, pp. 25-27). Local councils respond to the properties of the localities in their structures, norms and roles. However, from an institutional perspective what is more important is that locality provides legitimacy and 'perceptual frames' through which local authorities create meanings and make decisions about what is appropriate and what is not. It is

somewhat obvious that locality is the *raison d'être* of local government. However, here the main interest is in how locality is also internalised within the identity, symbols, norms and values of local authorities

The case study provided insights into the different ways in which the three councils had been influenced by their localities. In Harborough, the rural nature of the locality was so strongly internalised that the actors perceived everything from the perspective of their rural status. An officer explained how their *worldview* is influenced by their rural environment:

Our view of the world is going to be formed by the environment in which we operate. We are a rural authority, our problem is being able to communicate with people who are living out in smaller communities out there, trying to deliver services to them in a cost effective way (emphasis added, Information Services Manager).

This was an important theme throughout the interviews in Harborough. When asked an open question about how the locality affects their strategy in general, a member distinguished the council from others on the grounds that “the sheer size and sparsity of some of the communities *is going to make the way you approach things very different*” (emphasis added, HDC). As discussed in the previous chapter, their rural context has become an important motivation for Harborough to use the Internet for both service delivery and consultation. However, this was not simply a response to local needs. The rural environment created a logic of appropriateness that favoured certain practices over others. For example, because the council was dispersed over a very large area, actors established the consultation forums based on six areas rather than demographic or user groups.

In Wellingborough, the locality’s impact was strongest in terms of the economic conditions of the locality. Some actors felt constrained in the sense that using the Internet was not seen as ‘appropriate’ because of the potential for exclusion of certain groups. Hence, the council chose to focus more on telephone than the Internet. In Oadby and Wigston, being a small suburban locality with a small budget was an important factor in shaping the council’s approach to electronic participation. There was a strong

sense that there was no need to use the Internet because it was already a small area where people could access the council offices easily. The logic of appropriateness encouraged actors not to spend public money on something that was not perceived as necessary.

Referring to the locality does not imply the existence of any objective facts about the locality, to which the councils respond in their strategies. Perceptions about the locality are as important as the facts of the locality. For example, in Harborough, interviewees often commented that because it was an affluent locality, people did not have many problems and hence they were not interested in participating. Although it was a 'fact' that Harborough was an affluent area, the idea that people do not participate because of their level of affluence was a 'perception'. However, perceptions are important. Because of this perception in Harborough, the actors may think that there is no scope for the council to enhance participation by introducing new channels of participation. The perception of citizens as being uninterested in local government was an important barrier to the use of the Internet for participation in all case study authorities. In order to support this perception, actors often pointed to the facts such as low take up of previous electronic consultation attempts.

The previous chapter concluded that attitudes towards electronic participation build on attitudes towards participation *per se*. This chapter explains how those perceptions and preferences were shaped within an institutional context. Four points have to be noted to clarify the role and importance of the institutional context. First, suggesting that local authorities respond to their external institutional environment does not mean that these authorities are passive agents merely responding to outside factors. Local authorities have a degree of autonomy and potential to affect their environment. The rationale behind this research is based on the belief that local authorities can make a difference by affecting levels and modes of participation. Second, the role of the institutional environment is not limited to a *constraining* role. On the contrary, institutions also *enable* actors to pursue certain goals. The case study provided some examples of actors using government policies to legitimise their agendas. For example, the Chief Executive

in Harborough noted that they were trying to increase their consultation initiatives and the government agenda 'gave legitimacy' to what they were already doing.

Third, referring to an institutional context does not imply that there exist objective institutions by which actors are automatically influenced. Institutions are human constructs in the sense that they exist as long as there is an agreement among actors that they exist. For example, one may suggest that Oadby and Wigston is not a small and approachable council. However, there is agreement among actors that it *is* a small and approachable council. This tacit agreement has a real impact on the strategy and behaviour of actors. Finally, institutions are perceived and understood in different ways by individuals or groups of individuals (e.g. members, officers, senior or junior staff). Actors (local authorities and individuals) try to make sense of their environment and when doing so their existing values and norms are important. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

This part of the chapter analysed the role of the wider institutional environment on the strategies of the case study local authorities. This was done in relation to central government, the local governance field and the locality. However, it is important to note that this is an analytic distinction. These levels are nested within each other and the idea of different levels is used for the purpose of conceptual clarification. Moreover, it is possible to add other levels such as institutions operating at the European or regional levels. Hence, the levels analysed above were not given; they were rather developed to serve the purposes of this research.

CONCLUSIONS

The research demonstrated that values and norms associated with consumer democracy and representative democracy were important in shaping the strategy of the three local authorities. Consumer democracy and representative democracy are defined as institutions because they are both sets of values and norms that constrain and guide behaviour and which are carried through certain routines and practices. Among these values, equality and high quality services were particularly important. Concerning

equality, as discussed in the previous chapter, there was a high level of awareness about issues of 'social exclusion'. Actors were constrained by a logic of appropriateness that prompted them to question the value of electronic participation in relation to the exclusion of certain groups. However, participation was also a desired value for democracy. Some actors believed it was 'part and parcel' of their job. Therefore, in a sense, there was a clash between two values embedded in the representative democracy.

The research demonstrated that in all cases, but especially in Oadby and Wigston, the values and norms associated with a consumerist democracy model, such as concern with good services, providing choice and customer care, were important in shaping strategy. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Internet was mainly seen as a tool that could be used to improve service provision. Actors were constrained in the sense that their understanding of the potential of the Internet was highly shaped by a strong normative tendency for providing high quality services.

The case study research analysed the importance of the wider institutional environment in the creation of dominant norms, explicit and implicit regulations and mimetic processes in the diffusion of certain rules and practices. The case study research demonstrated that the dominant e-government narrative within the central government, supported by formal rules and resource distribution, leads local authorities towards e-government purposes more than e-democracy and particularly electronic participation purposes. This is further accelerated by diffusion mechanisms in the local governance field, especially because of uncertainties related to the use of the Internet. As the previous chapter demonstrated, there are feelings of confusion and distrust towards the Internet. The local governance field also plays an important role in prioritising e-government outcomes and defining what is expected from local authorities.

The research identified developments towards both homogenisation and variation among local authorities in terms of their strategies for using the Internet.

Homogenisation is enhanced by coercive isomorphic processes stemming mainly from the central government. It is also enhanced by normative and mimetic isomorphism processes stemming largely from the local governance field. However, local authorities

also have their own values and norms, symbols and myths, which affect individual behaviour. This internal context, combined with pressures coming from the locality, leads to differing definitions of participation, differing understandings of the Internet and differing strategies in using the Internet for participation purposes. As Lowndes (2004) suggests, “top-down and bottom-up institutional influences interact in important ways to produce an uneven patterning of uniformity and diversity across local government”. Using concepts from institutional theory assisted in the identification of dual tendencies of isomorphism and variation between local authorities.

Overall, the chapter revealed a tendency towards stability in terms of the persistence of existing understandings of participation and the adoption of the Internet in a manner that would not pose a challenge to the dominant institutions. This finding contradicts some of the literature that is based on the anticipation of revolutionary change. However, this is also because, so far, the purpose of the analysis was investigating the role of the institutional context without examining the design of new institutions associated with electronic democracy. However, the institutional context is not a constant. There may be scope to build new institutions associated with electronic participation with an intentional design programme. The next chapter analyses the design of new institutions within this context.

Institutional theory has been particularly useful in the analysis in two respects. First, it provided the tools to observe and explain the processes of homogenisation and variation at the same time by reference to the disaggregated nature of institutions operating at different levels. It also enabled an analysis of how given definitions in the literature and the objective properties of the Internet can be shaped differently in different contexts. For example, the previous chapter demonstrated that there were different motivations for participation initiatives in the three case study authorities. Concepts from sociological institutionalism help in understanding how those motivations, meanings and perceptions are constructed within the institutional contexts.

CHAPTER 9

ANALYSING THE FINDINGS FROM THE CASE STUDIES: INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter analysed the institutional context of the three local authorities as a stable context. However, within this *context* there is also an ongoing design *process*. The whole process initiated by the central government relating to the use of the Internet for citizen participation could be analysed as an *institutional design process*. As discussed in Chapter 3, the New Labour government has been implementing a ‘modernisation’ and ‘democratic renewal’ programme that goes beyond structural or policy change. This programme aims to see citizen participation as part of local authorities’ culture and strongly encourages the use of the Internet (together with other ICTs) for this purpose. The role of the ‘modernisation agenda’ and ‘democratic renewal’ is not only limited to a policy impact. As Lowndes and Wilson (2003) suggest, from the start the reform programme was ‘self-consciously normative’ (p. 284) in the sense that New Labour sought to secure a shift in values through the redesign of political institutions insisting that “policies flow from values and not vice versa” (Blair 1998 cited in Lowndes and Wilson, 2003, p. 284). The government affects local authorities’ policies, structures and values through various regulations, targets and sanctions. However, more importantly, these programmes contribute to an understanding and diffusion of the concept of ‘modern’ as the desired and dominant value. The concept of modern is strongly associated with citizen participation and the use of the new technologies. It is possible to suggest that the programme creates new guidelines for local authorities to follow. For these reasons, it needs to be considered as an institutional design process rather than simply as policy change.

Two important issues need to be considered. First, referring to an ‘intentional’ design process does not mean that the ‘evolutionary’ nature of institutional change is ignored. There may be important interactions between evolutionary and interventionist aspects of

institutional change. To put it more specifically, there is an ongoing process in the local government context towards greater involvement of citizens. Within this ongoing process, more recently, there has been an intentional effort to embed citizen participation in the working of local government particularly with the use of the Internet. These evolutionary and intentional aspects of change may interact in significant ways. Secondly, there is no single design. As Goodin (1996) suggests, “there are just lots of localised attempts at partial design cutting across one another” (p. 28). In the local government context, this multiple design process involves design of political leadership structures and new electoral arrangements. Local authorities and individual actors try to make sense of all these processes at the same time. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge other design processes without losing the focus of the research, which is the design of new institutions associated with electronic participation. Thirdly, there is no single designer. Although the design process is initiated by the central government, local authorities as collective actors and individuals within local authorities are also part of the process. Therefore, the design process should be considered as a multi-layer process rather than a top-down process.

The institutional design process will be analysed in order to understand the following:

- How do the sticky aspects of institutions interact with design processes? For example, do existing perceptions of participation change with the introduction of the Internet or are they reinforced?
- How do individuals and local authorities react to institutional design processes?
- How can we explain processes of change and continuity in local government?

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify that institutional design is not only about introducing new modes of participation. Such new modes are closely related to general changes in values and patterns of behaviour. Building new institutions associated with electronic participation involves changes in formal rules, creation of new values and norms, the establishment of new roles and structures and, finally, the creation of new patterns of behaviour.

In terms of the creation of formal rules, the previous chapter provided some information on the written regulations initiated by the central government. Local authorities also had their own formal rules in relation to consultation and use of the Internet. IEG Statements are good examples providing information about formal procedures and rules in relation to the use of the Internet. Concerning the creation of new norms and values, there has been a growing emphasis on values such as 'efficiency', 'innovation', 'consultation' and 'partnership'. The formal rules and associated values are also reflected in new structures and roles such as e-champions, webmasters, IT steering groups, consultation teams and external partnerships such as the Welland. As the previous chapter demonstrated, new participation channels have also been set up through using the websites or community portals. The important question concerns whether or not these changes have been followed by changes in patterns of behaviour. Even when the actors agreed on the value of some new structures and values, they admitted that they could not think of them or apply them automatically. This is related to the degree of institutionalisation, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

The first part of this chapter analyses resistance processes and the reasons behind resistance. The second part analyses the strategies that local authorities follow in relation to design initiatives. Although design is a multi-layer process with multiple actors on multiple levels, in the first and second parts design is associated with the central government in order to analyse how local authorities react to design processes as *organisations/collective actors*. Local authorities are presented as coherent units without acknowledging the differences among individuals operating within them. Then, the third part analyses the design process as a process going on *inside* local authorities. At this point, the analysis brings the individuals within local authorities into the picture and explores how their behaviour constitutes/influences the design process.

SOURCES OF RESISTANCE

Institutional design is difficult because it goes beyond changes in formal structures. Design involves emphasising new values and creating new patterns of behaviour. The case study research demonstrated that design efforts were mainly seen as threatening in

terms of changing the distribution of power and roles. As Olsen notes (1997) “Those affected see reform proposals not as improvements and progress but as disruptive, resource demanding, painful and *threatening in terms of status, power and policy consequences*” (emphasis added, p. 211). This may not always be the case as some actors may benefit from championing new institutions; this will be discussed in relation to the role of actors. Nevertheless, interviewees often implied that some people are against change because they think their status would be affected. Commenting on using the technology in their work, an officer noted that some people think it is an opportunity to further their own particular viewpoints and power whilst others perceive it as a threat (Information Services Manager, Harborough). In some cases, actors themselves raised concerns about potential threats to their roles (i.e. elected members concerning direct participation undermining their role as representatives).

Change is difficult because “staying with the existing framework provides the benefits of increased competence and efficiency within that framework” (Lanzara, 1998, p. 7). The new technologies bring many possibilities for experimentation. The government also encourages the exploration of these technologies by providing financial incentives. However, “exploration involves risk taking, experimentation, discovery and play-like activities, invention, diversity and willingness to live with ambiguity” (*ibid*, p. 5). This uncertainty is usually a barrier to trying new ways of doing things or to being the first organisation willing to experiment with something new. The Chief Executive in Wellingborough raised this point, suggesting “*I don't see us as being sort of a trial place as such. We want to be reasonably ahead of the game but not to the point where we are doing the experimenting, making the losses that other experimenters get*”. Another officer in the same council noted that they are “*dipping their toes in the water and watching how e-government and e-democracy models are being more developed*” (Head of Revenues, Services and Benefits). However, this was not the case in all authorities. In Harborough, there was a very clear willingness to experiment with new ways of working.

Resistance does not only stem from the fear of losing power or from risks associated with change. Institutions are also difficult to change because they acquire normative

value and recognised legitimacy, which serves to reproduce certain meanings and structures over time. The case study research suggested that the embeddedness of existing norms was an important obstacle during the design of new institutions associated with electronic participation. Often interviewees emphasised the issue of 'mindset change' implying the difficulty of changing the way people think (Information Services Manager, Harborough). An officer noted, "It is not like introducing a new accounting package. It is a mindset change" (Head of Community and Cultural Development, Wellingborough). Respondents also mentioned that change was seen as unnecessary because people thought "we have always done things this way; we don't have to change" (Member e-champion, Harborough).

Lanzara (1998) notes that during design processes "there is conflict of values and norms which are equally valued and none of which can be excluded. There is ambiguity over relevant values. There is a mix of pre-existing practices and rules, which will not be easily dismissed, *and* alternative, emergent ones, which strive to find their way into meaning and legitimation" (emphasis original, p. 5). Another reason for opposition to new institutions is the need to balance new and old institutions or conflicting values during the transition periods. The case studies suggested that 'participation' and 'equality' were considered as two such values that were difficult to combine. For this reason, even when local authorities were willing to establish institutions associated with electronic participation, actors mentioned the need to keep their old structures to provide equal opportunities. A similar conflict was identified throughout the interviews, and especially in Oadby and Wigston, between the values of 'efficiency' and 'care'. There was some willingness to benefit from the Internet as a way of improving efficiency, but there was also a concern that the local residents might not like the council to be a 'remote call centre' (Chief Executive).

A similar concern was observed in Harborough between the need to develop long-term strategies and to keep the services going at the same time. The member e-champion noted that they were a very innovative council in terms of using the Internet, but that she was concerned that "you can be innovative and all the rest of it and forget the street cleaning". The Leader also implied that the enthusiasm for electronic ways of working

should be balanced. He said “you have to get that balance right between being enthusiastic at the top about ideas and get a bit more on the delivery side just to make sure that we actually do produce tangible outcomes” (Leader, Harborough). These comments hinted at a worry about the balance between delivering services and maintaining day-to-day activities whilst at the same time planning for long-term democratic or managerial goals.

The need to maintain day-to-day work and the transaction costs of change makes building new institutions difficult because of the lack of resources necessary to be expended on strategies for designing and implementing new institutions. More importantly, maintaining the old structures generates a dilemma concerning the legitimacy of new and old institutions. If old institutions are no longer useful, actors might wonder why it is worth keeping them; if they are still useful, why change them? In order to prevent such a legitimacy crisis, processes of ‘layering’ (Thelen, 2003) or ‘*bricolage*’ (Lanzara, 1998) rather than complete transformation emerge in local authorities. This is discussed next.

STRATEGIES FOR REACTION

Organisations may choose to comply with the design processes if there is a dependency situation. Often respondents implied that some of their actions and strategies were heavily influenced by their dependence on government funding. Some interviewees raised a concern that this might lead to tactical behaviour and tokenism. The Director of Resources in Oadby and Wigston commented: “I am really concerned about tokenism that we will simply do things to try and count against these incredible targets of 100% in five years. That in fact is happening right across the local government”. This is one reason that the research revealed variations between formal and informal accounts of developments in the case studies. In the IEG statements, the councils avoided using expressions implying disagreement with the government policies, although respondents often did this throughout the interviews. For example, in Oadby and Wigston, although many respondents claimed that using new technologies would create *exclusion*, the council’s first IEG statement noted that using those technologies would assist in

ensuring social *inclusion* by offering a number of more attractive forms of interaction including the Internet.

However, as discussed in Chapter 5, linking compliance with resource dependence distracts attention from the normative aspects of organisational behaviour.

Organisations may reject or build new institutions on normative grounds. New institutions may be adopted if they have acquired social meanings especially through 'external legitimisation' (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). A good example was the implementation of the community portal concept in Wellingborough following its perceived success in Harborough. There were also occasional references to the private sector and to the way in which the Internet was used by the private sector. Again, the perceived success of the private sector in using the Internet seemed to be another motivation for councils to use the Internet and led to the acceleration of isomorphic processes, especially in Wellingborough.

Reactions to design processes are not 'all or nothing' approaches. On the contrary, reactions are patchy and ambiguous. Some institutions may be adapted rapidly; some may be extended and supplemented with new arrangements. While old institutions survive, new ones can be built. Local authorities use *bricolage* (Lanzara, 1998) to balance old and new institutions, to address existing power relations and to ensure smooth processes of change, rather than radical and risky transformations. The case studies revealed some examples of *bricolage* where existing institutions were extended or supplemented rather than completely changed. In Wellingborough, the establishment of a community development department initiated the formation of a series of new institutions. Actors within the department established a rural forum and a citizen panel as new consultation arrangements. However, dominant institutions prevailed. The citizen panel is a mailing list to which the council sends questionnaires twice a year. Therefore, it was an extension of the established practice of sending questionnaires, rendering it more regular and systematic. When asked in what ways the council was planning to use the website for consultation purposes, the officer e-champion said it has to be through online polls. He highlighted the importance of 'the way the council thinks':

Certainly, at the beginning it is more likely to be opinion polls. Because *that is the way the council thinks*. We ask the questions and you can tell me what you think between these three options. Whereas in discussion groups you are completely free. To begin with, *in terms of the way the council does its work it is certainly more on the opinion poll type approach* (Officer e-champion, Wellingborough).

These examples suggested that even when local authorities were willing to introduce innovative methods of participation and to use the Internet for this purpose, they tended to build new methods of consultation on top of pre-existing institutional patterns and practices. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Internet was not generally used in ways that would challenge the institutions of representative democracy.

Referring to 'reactions' to design processes does not imply that local authorities are on the receiving side of the design as passive agents. The overall effect of the design process depends on the interaction between multiple designers. As Lanzara (1998) puts it:

In institutional building a host of social and political actors holding multiple and conflicting logics of action and legitimising principles interact over time within an ecology of interactions and the composition effect of their interactions may eventually crystallise into institutional frameworks and codes that more smoothly allow for local experimentation and further recombination (p. 30).

In fact, there are deliberate attempts to involve local authorities in the process of institutional design. For example, pilot projects initiated by the central government enable local authorities to experiment with different technologies and projects. The results of these projects are then disseminated to other local authorities and they become part of the national strategy. In that sense, the democratic renewal programme can be seen as a 'scheme for designing institutions' (Goodin, 1996) in which several designers at the local level contribute through their local knowledge. Harborough, for example, is a designer at the local level constituting a part of the 'scheme' through the Welland Partnership. However, local authorities do not have to be part of such a pilot project in order to be considered as a designer. The day to day work of local authorities and the way actors in local authorities implement national and local strategies are all part of the design process. As Goodin (1996) suggests, design is a multi-layer process.

So far, local authorities have been considered as coherent units; no mention has been made of the individual actors within these authorities. However, it is important to understand how individual actors affect, and how they are affected by, the design process. This is analysed next.

INSTITUTIONS AND ACTORS

It is necessary to identify the main actors within local authorities who are involved in the design and implementation of institutions associated with electronic participation because it is likely that particular actors may try to introduce or give new emphasis to particular values. Chapter 5 explained that the background and worldviews of actors affect the ways in which they interpret institutions (as well as the ways in which they are affected by institutions). Findings in Chapter 7 confirmed that attitudes towards participation vary depending on individual roles (e.g. councillor-officer and members of different departments). Therefore, it is important to understand which actors play a major role and how this affects strategies concerning Internet use. This also reflects the position of this study in the sense that rather than seeking merely to understand the impact of institutions on actors, it is also concerned with the *interaction* between institutions and actors. Analysing the extent to which actors are constrained and enabled by the institutional context also demonstrates the incoherence and ambiguities of that context.

Identifying the main actors

The case studies suggested three important considerations concerning the role of actors. First, actors who would have promoted participation outcomes were not involved. Second, the role of councillors was marginal. Third, there were large differences between the roles of e-champions in the three cases.

Chapter 7 demonstrated that the Internet is mostly seen as an information provision and service delivery medium rather than a participation tool. As a result of these perceptions, actors who would have promoted the use of the website for participation were not involved. However, it could also be the case that, because such actors were not

included, the website was not perceived as a participation medium. There were steering groups to manage the e-government and e-democracy agenda. These groups usually consisted of a head of services and actors with IT roles who were mostly interested in promoting their individual services rather than developing a corporate approach in using the Internet for participation purposes.

In all cases, the involvement of councillors was marginal. Officers often commented that members did not see the benefits of using the Internet. An officer commented that members were more interested in the traditional aspects of their role rather than strategic issues such as e-government. He asked, “why haven’t we changed the rusty windows in number 27? That is the bottom line for a lot of them” (Research and Development Officer, Harborough). In Harborough, the Leader and some members of the executive were more interested in the e-government agenda than were the councillors in the other two cases. However, this was mostly because the e-government strategy was driven by the Welland Partnership. In other words, members were more interested in aspects of the partnership and its associated funding than they were in the use of the Internet for participation purposes.

Following the government guidelines, every local authority had to appoint an officer and member e-champion with the aim of promoting the e-government agenda. However, this role was fulfilled in very different ways. This could be because this role has not been properly defined anywhere. It may also be explained by the differing personalities, capabilities and personal agendas of e-champions. Alternatively, it may be related to the other roles of the e-champions in the council. In fact, investigating those who were appointed as e-champions in the three cases reveals some important insights about which institutional arrangements and rules encouraged these people to rise to that position. In Wellingborough, there were two officer e-champions: the ICT Manager and the Head of Administration. The purpose was to balance the ICT perspectives with broader issues. While the ICT Manager was responsible for the technical side of the developments such as relations with IT companies, the Head of Administration was focusing on change management in the council such as staff issues. In Harborough, the

Director of Services²⁷ who had a background in housing was the officer e-champion. This may be taken as an indication that the council perceives the e-government agenda as more than simply a technical issue. In Oadby and Wigston, the Chief Executive was the e-champion. This was related to the fact that, because it was such a small council, she was responsible for everything already and, thus, the e-government/democracy agenda was no different. This also had a symbolic element. In appointing the highest-level officer as e-champion, the council aimed to signal that e-government was taken seriously. The following table demonstrates the actors involved in the e-government agenda in the three case study authorities.

Table 9.1: Main actors in developing strategies in relation to use of the Internet

	<i>Wellingborough</i>	<i>Oadby and Wigston</i>	<i>Harborough</i>
Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Officer E-champions (ICT Services Manager and Head of Administration) • Chief Executive • Director of Finance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chief Executive (Officer E-champion) • ICT Manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chief Executive • Officer E-champion (Director of Services) • Member E-champion • Leader of the Council

Two important themes arise from this table: the dominance of IT actors in steering the e-government agenda and the lack of involvement of the member e-champions despite their formal role. In relation to IT actors, in Oadby and Wigston, the whole agenda was driven by the Chief Executive and the ICT Manager, which is not surprising for such a small authority. The ICT Manager had been in the authority for three years and, since his arrival, the size of the IT department had expanded from two to nine people. Nearly all interviewees pointed to him as the person responsible for the e-government strategy together with the Chief Executive. There was also a webmaster whose involvement was limited to the maintenance of the website, but who was perceived as an important actor by members of staff. One officer said the webmaster was employed ‘to realise e-government’ (Best Value Officer, Oadby and Wigston). This comment was very significant in highlighting the increasing power of IT actors and demonstrating how e-

²⁷ Initially the Chief Executive was the e-champion. Director of Services became the e-champion in 2002 with the introduction of second IEG Statement.

government was perceived by some actors simply as a website. When general questions about the council's strategy were asked, it was very common to receive a response like "The Chief Executive would know that" or "The ICT Manager works on that". There seemed to be a considerable concentration of power in the hands of these two actors.

The steering of the e-democracy agenda by IT actors may have important implications for participation and democracy. Although the ICT Manager in Oadby and Wigston claimed to be the 'key person' in the e-government agenda, when asked about the general take up levels of the council's online consultation, he replied that this was an operational detail that he would not know. Similarly, he suggested that the Legal and Administration Department would be in a better position to provide information about e-democracy issues. This was because he perceived e-democracy as equal to procedures of e-voting. Perceiving e-democracy simply as e-voting was common throughout the interviews. However, what distinguishes this case was that it was someone claiming to be the 'key' player responsible for developing strategy. Moreover, the ICT Manager and the Webmaster were not concerned about the involvement of councillors in e-government issues 'as long as they approve the spending' (ICT Manager). Indeed, the fact that councillors were 'political' was deemed a good reason for them to keep their distance. Commenting on the role of elected members in the development of the council's website, the webmaster noted the following:

They (councillors) are political animals and the *website is not political*. It has to be purely neutral. So if they are involved, you would have to be very careful about it. I am quite happy with the lack of contact (Webmaster).

In Harborough, the e-government project officer responsible for the maintenance of the community portals also had a rather low opinion of politics. He noted that the official website was "for *boring* information such as Best Value plans, minutes and agendas of council meetings". However, what distinguished these two cases was that, in Harborough, the role and power of IT actors were balanced with actors possessing a more social background. This was vital because when the involvement of IT actors was not balanced with the involvement of actors with social backgrounds, it was more likely that important social and political issues surrounding the use of the Internet would be

given insufficient consideration. This may have profound implications for local democracy, especially considering that developments towards electronic participation could potentially affect the representative role of members quite substantially.

The second theme arising from the table above concerns the lack of involvement of member e-champions (except in Harborough). The case studies showed that despite its being a formal role, this title was not always taken seriously. In Wellingborough, the two member e-champions were almost non-existent. When they were asked about the people involved in e-government matters, the interviewees made no mention of the member e-champions. Only after being asked specifically about the e-champions would they reply 'oh yes'. On one occasion, the Head of Community Development suggested that "for change to happen you need champions". When it was replied that they already have champions, she said "yes, but real ones". Interviewing the member e-champions supported the incoherence between their formal role and their informal views about e-government. The Member e-champion in Wellingborough was pulled into this role just because he knew more about IT than other members. As he put it: "I just got called into this; but I didn't promote it". In Harborough, the member e-champion was very excited about the possibilities for the council as a whole of using the technology. However, her involvement in drafting the IEG statements was very limited. The statements were written by the ICT Services Manager and the officer e-champion. In Oadby and Wigston, despite several contacts, the member e-champion did not agree to be interviewed. Other respondents noted that she was very IT literate. On several occasions, respondents implied that because she was IT literate she must have been knowledgeable and interested in e-government issues. However, as the case of Wellingborough shows this may not necessarily be the case.

Analysing the role of actors revealed some important empirical findings. The research showed that

⇒ IT actors have been becoming increasingly influential. When their involvement is not balanced with the involvement of people with a social background, this

may have negative impacts in terms of the potential neglect of significant social aspects of using the technology e.g. digital divide.

- ⇒ Elected members have been largely excluded either because they are not interested in technology (which may be related to their age profile or unawareness of the potential for using the Internet) or because the e-government agenda is driven by a small group of senior people especially chief executives and directors of finance.
- ⇒ There has been a divergence between elected members who use the Internet extensively to communicate with citizens (which is a small minority) and those who do not use it at all. This may have important implications since it introduces a digital divide issue between elected members.
- ⇒ Actors who might have promoted the use of the Internet for participation purposes, such as members of community development departments, are not included in developing strategies. This provides a partial explanation of why the Internet is mostly seen as a service provision tool. However, the causal relation may work the other way around as well. In other words, because the Internet is seen mostly as a service provision tool, actors who would promote participation outcomes may not be involved.

Analysing the Interaction between Institutions and Actors

Referring to an institutional context does not suggest that actors live within a coherent setting that constrains and enables them in the same way. On the contrary, there may be inconsistencies between actors' perceptions and behaviours. Actors may depart from dominant values and patterns of behaviour. Often interviewees were confused about the extent to which their behaviour was shaped by their own interests and ideas *vis-à-vis* the institutional environment. An officer observed that "it is hard to distinguish between what we are encouraged to think and what as free individuals we create within and from ourselves" (Head of Community and Cultural Development Department,

Wellingborough). Another officer mentioned how individuals start to take institutions for granted over time. He said: "If you have a new member of staff working here, you need to speak to them within the first six months because soon they become part of it and they just accept it as normal" (Best Value Officer, Oadby and Wigston). When asked in what way his council differs from others, an officer replied that it is difficult to identify such differences because 'when you work within the organisation you don't even recognise it because that is just the way it is done around here' (Information Services Manager, Harborough). These expressions were examples of how institutions were taken for granted.

Although there was confusion over the extent to which their ideas were shaped by the institutional context, there were occasions when actors obviously departed from the dominant norms or expected ideas. Commenting on the government's strategy and targets, an officer prefaced his comment by saying, "I personally think, and this is very much personal not the authority's view..." (Director of Resources, Oadby and Wigston). In another case, an officer struggled to differentiate his views from the council's. He began by saying "do you want my honest answer? I think it will be very difficult. This is now me speaking as an individual" (Information Services Manager, Harborough). These comments indicated that the impact of the institutional context on actors' behaviour was neither complete nor final. For this reason, when drawing conclusions about the strategies of the three local authorities, internal inconsistencies and ambiguities have to be acknowledged. Reflecting such inconsistencies, a member in Harborough noted that approaches towards consultation varied a lot between departments and individuals. As he explained:

Harborough District Council *doesn't really have a coherent and corporate approach to consultation*. One department or particular officer may use consultation in a different way to an officer in another department. There is definitely a lot of different opinion on the sides of both members and officers on what the value of consultation is and why we are doing it. We do not have a coherent approach towards it (Elected member, Harborough).

This substantial variation between departments and individuals may also indicate a limited level of institutionalisation and this will be discussed in the next chapter. When

reflecting on the attitude of the council towards participation, interviewees often emphasised that although there may be dominant values within the council, these are not implemented in the same way. An officer said that there is corporate will and direction for participatory initiatives, but he was sceptical about 'whether all departments go down the same commitment' (Head of Housing Operations and Policy, Wellingborough). An officer e-champion noted that they tried to convince different departments of the benefits of using the website but 'some departments see the website as an opportunity to promote their services while the others see it as a bit of inconvenience' (Wellingborough). The fact that some actors challenged formal rules also indicated that actors do not simply implement rules. Commenting on a management change, which was initiated by the Chief Executive without much consultation with the councillors, a young Liberal Democrat councillor in Harborough complained:

The constitution allows the Chief Executive who isn't an elected representative. The Chief Executive had a delegated power to do whatever he liked. *That might be what is written in the Constitution but is it morally the right thing to do?*

The case study research also suggested that the design of new institutions affect the existing power relations between actors. This finding echoed Goodin (1996) who notes "institutions embody, preserve and impart differential power resources with respect to different individuals and groups" (p. 20). A good example of this was observed in relation to the increasing profile of IT actors. Another example was related to the importance of the 'hobby' element. The case studies suggested that actors who had a previous interest in IT were more likely to benefit from the Internet for various purposes. This was true of both officers and councillors and signalled the lack of a corporate approach to using the Internet. More importantly, there were signs that ad hoc use of the Internet by some actors may lead to exclusion of others. For example, in Harborough, a councillor who defined himself as an 'electronic councillor' had his own email lists and electronic newsletters to keep in touch with his constituents. Contrary to this and as discussed in the previous chapter, many councillors did not want to use the Internet. In short, the use of the Internet enhanced the position of some actors whilst diminishing the position of others. This situation also has important implications for representative democracy. Although all councillors are elected to represent people,

some of them become more powerful in doing so by exploiting the opportunities offered by the technology.

Analysing the interaction between actors and institutions reveals important theoretical findings. The analysis showed that

- ⇒ Actors were both constrained and enabled by their institutional environment. However, their ideas and behaviours were not totally determined by that environment. This shows that the role of institutions on actors' behaviour is neither complete nor final.
- ⇒ Because the role of institutions on actors' behaviour is neither complete nor final, there was incoherence and there were ambiguities between individuals and departments in relation to their attitudes towards participation and the use of the Internet. This may also be indicative of a weakness of institutional theory and this will be discussed in detail in the final chapter.
- ⇒ Because institutions embody differential power relations, some actors are enabled more than the others. This leads to changing power relations between both elected members and officers; this was especially obvious in relation to the increasing power of IT actors.
- ⇒ An institutional analysis helped to demonstrate that formal roles may not always reflect the reality. As discussed in the previous chapter, formal structures and roles may be created for ceremonial purposes. Their relation to the actual day-to-day activities in the local authorities may be negligible. This was exemplified by the existence of e-champions who had a formal role to promote e-government and e-democracy purposes but who played no part in the developments. In one extreme case, the e-champion was strongly against the idea of participation and the use of the Internet for this purpose (see chapter 7).

CONCLUSIONS

As discussed in Chapter 4, many studies on the implications of the Internet for democracy emphasise rapid and transformative change. In taking an institutionalist approach, this research avoids technological determinism and explains why change is not easy. This may appear to be a statement of the obvious. However, institutional theory goes beyond that statement and specifies the constraints upon institutional design. The research demonstrated that design efforts are constrained because the design process is characterised by uncertainties and risks. As discussed in Chapter 7, there are feelings of uncertainty about how the electronic democracy models will develop. Building new institutions is also difficult because of transaction costs and the need to retain existing structures while at the same time experimenting with new ones. Existing structures and patterns of behaviour usually acquire legitimacy and normative meaning and become difficult to change. Design processes are also characterised by conflicting values. As discussed in the previous chapter, 'equality' and 'participation' are two such values, which the actors find difficult to embed in the new institutions they design. There is a belief that by designing new institutions of electronic participation, certain groups of people may potentially be excluded from participation processes.

Despite these constraints, new institutions *can* be designed. This is more likely to be achieved through layering, patch working or bricolage techniques that supplement, extend, or rearrange existing institutions rather than radically replacing them. As discussed in Chapter 7, interviewees were at pains to explain that they were not trying to 'replace' any of the existing channels of participation, that they were only 'adding' new ones. In this way, opposition to new institutions is minimised and problems of legitimacy and distrust are overcome. Because of these layering and bricolage techniques, there exist a range of old and new institutions operating together. While the traditional institutions of participation, such as elections and public meetings are retained, new institutions of participation such as panels and online discussion forums are built. Institutionalism provides the tools to explain this dual process of simultaneous change and continuity.

Institutional analysis also enabled the linking of structure and agency by focusing on the *interaction* between institutions and actors rather than seeking a one-way relation. Actors were both constrained and enabled by their institutional environment. However, their ideas and behaviours were not totally determined by the environment. Analysing the role of actors revealed that there is a tendency for the design process to be ‘hijacked’ by certain actors, such as senior IT and Finance officers. This may have profound implications for the role of local government. The previous chapter concluded that service delivery related outcomes were perceived as being more important than participation and democracy outcomes. This chapter suggests that this may be a result of the overrepresentation of certain actors such as those with IT roles who are more likely to seek ‘tangible’ benefits and in certain cases to perceive ‘politics’ as unnecessary. This may give rise to a potential problem of overlooking the democratic role of local government *vis-à-vis* its service delivery role.

So far, institutions have been treated almost as once-and-for-all creations. However, institutionalisation is a dynamic process. New institutions may not be institutions *yet* if they have not ‘completed’ this process. Stages of institutionalisation are discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 10

ANALYSING FINDINGS FROM CASE STUDIES: PROCESSES OF INSTITUTIONALISATION

INTRODUCTION

As the research propositions in Chapter 5 suggested, the design processes of institutions associated with electronic participation are hampered by internal institutional factors as well as the constraints of the wider institutional environment in which local authorities are embedded. Local authorities are still at the early stages in terms of the institutionalisation of new practices and rules associated with electronic participation. The first part of the chapter evaluates the degree of institutionalisation. The second part analyses the possible barriers to further institutionalisation and suggests certain factors that can potentially enhance processes of institutionalisation.

EVALUATING THE DEGREE OF INSTITUTIONALISATION

Chapter 5 introduced the stages of institutionalisation developed by Tolbert and Zucker (1999): habituation, objectification and sedimentation. According to their conceptualisation, full institutionalisation is about the standardization of procedures and the routinization of practices within the organisation. For Peters (1999b), too, “so long as there are substantial internal variations, there cannot be said to be an institution operative in the field” (p. 16). The research demonstrated that there has been only a limited level of institutionalisation associated with electronic participation. This is not to deny the significance of the formal changes that had taken place in terms of new structures and roles. There were also some changes in patterns of behaviour and thought. However, these institutions were still not taken for granted.

Although the research demonstrated only limited institutionalisation of new rules and practices associated with electronic participation, there were some signs of habituation. The main characteristics of the habituation stage are the generation of new structural arrangements, the formalisation of such arrangements in the policies

and procedures of a given organisation or set of organisations and simultaneous innovation. Examples of new structural arrangements in relation to the use of the Internet were the formation of teams/groups working on e-government issues such as IT steering groups. There were also specific job titles such as e-champions, webmasters, and e-government project officers, which were formalised in the organisational charts. Various local authorities had been experimenting with innovative methods of benefiting from the Internet and these experiments were supported by government funding.

Some signs of objectification were also observed during the research. Objectification implies that the meanings attributed to habitualised action have come to be generalised, that is, to be independent of the specific individuals who execute the action. The objectification stage, as explained in Chapter 5, is characterised by “some degree of social consensus among organisational decision makers concerning the value of a new structure, and the increasing adoption by organisations on the basis of that consensus” (Tolbert and Zucker, 1999, p. 176). At this stage, local authorities use evidence from a variety of sources such as previous experiments and their contact with other local authorities to calculate the costs and benefits of adapting a new structure. Local councils monitor other authorities, especially those they perceive as similar to themselves. The purpose is to minimise the risks associated with change and the adoption of new structures. These risks are not just related to the financial cost of experimenting. Observing and imitating others provides ‘external legitimisation’ (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) to new structures and helps to minimise objections from opposition groups. Many experiments with electronic participation (and e-democracy in general) have been imitated by other local authorities when they are perceived as successful or legitimate (see discussion of normative and mimetic isomorphism in Chapter 9). A good example of such mimetic processes was observed in Wellingborough and Harborough in relation to the development of community portals.

Despite the spread of new structures at a formal level, there was still a lack of social consensus among organisational decision-makers on the value of new institutions associated with electronic participation. The case study research suggested that there were four specific indicators which demonstrated that there had only been a limited

degree of institutionalisation. *First*, new institutions were advocated by a small group of people and their existence depended on certain individuals. This was exemplified best in Harborough. Although the council had an ambitious strategy in terms of using the Internet, this was developed and advocated only by a few players, and mainly the officer e-champion. The Chief Executive acknowledged this dependence by noting that were the council to lose certain essential members of staff that had been engaged in e-government projects, it could take the council a year to recover. The member e-champion raised a similar concern by referring to a hypothetical scenario in which the officer e-champion was recruited by another organisation. As she explained:

[Let's say,] three months on, she [the officer e-champion] is headhunted. Boom! There goes the council. Day to day work will still go on, but the strategic direction that the council would follow would collapse; *a lot of things are in her head. It is to do with her networking, her contacts.* If she wasn't in the frame, I think we would be in serious difficulties. She pulled it all together (Member e-champion, Harborough).

A *second* indication of limited institutionalisation was the substantial variation between departments and individuals in terms of their approach to institutions associated with electronic participation. An obvious example of this was discovered during the analysis of websites. There were large differences between the sub-sections maintained by different departments. In Oadby and Wigston, while some sections were completely empty, others had lots of information and some consultation exercises. Even the styles of the different sections of the websites varied. Attitudes towards participation also varied a lot between individuals and departments signalling limited institutionalisation (see Chapter 7).

A *third* indicator was the strong opposition from some players either to participation itself or to the use of the Internet for the purpose of participation. In some cases, actors even contradicted their formal roles and expressed strong opposition (e.g. the member e-champion in Wellingborough). Especially when the opposition comes from actors with power and resources, institutionalisation becomes more difficult. These actors may openly use their power to fight against new structures. If they are unable to do this, they may behave tactically. Some respondents pointed to tokenism and noted that, in order to tick the boxes for the government, they had to adopt new structures. A young elected

member in Harborough noted that some of the consultation the council was undertaking was to “tick boxes on government sheets to say yes we’ve done the consultation”. This implies that participation initiatives were applied only because of coercive regulations and that as a result their legitimacy was limited.

A *fourth* indicator was related to the degree to which new structures and values were taken for granted. Although actors were aware that they could make better use of the website for inviting citizen participation, they could not think of it as part of the ‘standard operating procedure’ (Hall, 1986) of local authorities. A number of times interviewees noted that they would like to use the Internet for this purpose, but that their daily routine did not allow for it or that “they are not in a mindset to do it as second nature”. This implies that the new roles and ways of doing things were not taken for granted *yet*. When a new structure or role was not institutionalised, respondents found it difficult, in the first instance, to acknowledge them. For example, when the e-champions were not regarded as real champions, respondents were unable to think of their names when asked about the people who were involved in e-government issues.

While these indicators suggest that institutionalisation was limited, it is necessary to take a number of countervailing tendencies into consideration. First, although substantial variation signals a lack of institutionalisation, it is also part of the nature of institutional life, which is characterised by incoherence and ambiguity. “Institutions are ‘differentiated’ in the sense that they do not necessarily ‘fit’ together to form a whole, or represent functionally desirable solutions” (Lowndes, 2002a, p. 100). Therefore, even if we were examining well-institutionalised structures and norms, we would expect to come across such variations. Moreover, many scholars suggest that institutional design should not be viewed as wholesale change. Organisations do not respond as a whole unit; their responses may be patchy. Therefore, internal variation may be indicative of a normal process of institutionalisation rather than the lack of it. A second issue is related to the need to observe institutions for long periods of time in order to understand the various levels of institutionalisation. Tolbert and Zucker’s (1999) sedimentation stage is “a process characterised both by complete spread of structures across the adopters and by perpetuation of structures *over a lengthy period of time*” (emphasis added, p. 178).

The time span of this research was not enough to observe the institutionalisation process until its end²⁸. Rather, the purpose of the research was to observe the institutionalisation process as it continues and to identify factors that may help to accelerate the process. These factors are discussed next.

FACTORS FOR FURTHER INSTITUTIONALISATION

The process of institutionalisation can be enhanced by certain factors. The case study research identified five such factors. There is a need for publicly defensible and justified institutions, recognition of the wider institutional environment, clarity about values, demonstrable results and external legitimisation. These are discussed in turn.

The need for publicly defensible and justified institutions

New institutions have to be 'publicly defensible' in order to take hold (Goodin, 1996). They need to be justifiable, both socially and economically, in the eyes of the public and the designers themselves. In some cases, there was a sense that new institutions associated with electronic participation were not seen as necessary and justified. The best example of this was the concern quite widely expressed about the social exclusion of certain groups due to the use of electronic participation. This point was discussed extensively in previous chapters, especially in relation to the conflicting values of equality and participation.

The problem of publicly defensible institutions went beyond concerns about social exclusion and was most obvious in Oadby and Wigston, although similar concerns were raised in the other two authorities. In Oadby and Wigston, new institutions associated with electronic participation were considered illegitimate for three main reasons. First, there was a belief that there was no need for electronic participation due to the geography of the locality. Second, there was a belief that the council offered sufficient mechanisms for people to participate anyway. Third, the fact that the council had to run

²⁸ In fact, there is no such thing as an 'end'. Institutional life consists of continuous change as much as stability. Tolbert and Zucker's 'stages of institutionalisation' misses the point that even the fully institutionalised institutions will change some time.

parallel consultation, both online and offline, was considered economically unjustifiable. When commenting on these points, interviewees referred to the public views as if they had consulted the public about IT investment.

In terms of geographic proximity, Chapter 7 already noted that there was a paradox relating to the properties of the Internet and the notion of local participation.

Interviewees in Oadby and Wigston believed that the Internet could be the right medium for large rural areas, but not for Oadby and Wigston because it was already very small.

Advocating this point, an officer noted that most people were within an easy range, car ownership was high and the transport links were reasonable. He pointed out that people can always use the telephone and claimed that the council does not need a “complete overhaul of the e-government imposed on them” (Director of Community Services).

Another officer compared Oadby and Wigston with large rural areas and noted:

I don't think we need all this. I think that many authorities like Harborough and Yorkshire districts where they just cover massive rural areas, you can see that this is a really good way of communicating with local residents. This particular area is so small actually you could walk here from anywhere in the borough. I think we need the website but the residents would benefit more from reviewing our opening hours and making our physical accessibility better (Director of Development and Consumer Services).

The second concern in Oadby and Wigston was related to the lack of a perceived need for additional channels of participation. An officer noted that the government was moving towards ‘participation for the sake of participation’. He believed that “if people got issues and problems as long as you got the means, they can participate through phoning up or getting in touch with the councillors” (Director of Community Services). This signalled a strong belief in the institutions of representative democracy (councillors are there for citizens anyway) and an old-fashioned public service ethos (citizens can telephone anyway if they have a complaint). A director who was about to retire commented that the “Prime Minister must have been drunk when he came up with the idea of trying to foster a non-existent community via electronic means”. This comment reflected a belief in the strictly limited scope for facilitating participation through top-down arrangements.

The third concern was related to the resources that the council had available to put into electronic participation. Because Oadby and Wigston had one of the smallest local government budgets in the UK, there was a belief that the council should not be expected to follow the same route as the bigger authorities. This feeling echoed Pratchett and Leach's (2003) point that the national e-government strategy penalises smaller local authorities because these authorities need the same technological base as larger authorities. Moreover, in Oadby and Wigston good service delivery was always mentioned as the ultimate goal of the council and the money spent on electronic consultation was largely seen as wasted. An officer said "you can put a full structure in place (referring to electronic means) but is it worth the resources you are putting into it? You could use those resources in terms of better service delivery" (Director of Community Services). There were also concerns that it was not worth the cost considering the number of people that actually made use of electronic means of participation. The Chief Executive said that the council had to run parallel systems in order to provide an alternative for people who did not want to use a computer and who wanted to come to offices to speak to a real person. The fact that councils received a very limited response to their online consultation constituted a barrier in the other case study authorities as well.

This research did not involve finding out the citizens' perspective. Therefore, it is beyond the limits of the research to analyse whether there is a demand for electronic participation among citizens or not. However, in a sense, this does not matter. The *perceptions* about what people think were almost as important. As discussed in Chapter 8, these perceptions shape logics of appropriateness and guide actors in deciding what constitutes right and justified behaviour. In defending the view that the council should not spend public money on electronic participation, actors were guided by their perceptions of public opinion.

The need for recognising the wider institutional environment

As discussed in Chapter 5, institutions are nested within a wider institutional context. Chapter 8 considered that context in relation to three levels: central government, the

local governance field and the locality. Even if there is a strong commitment and the appropriate conditions within the local authority in relation to the design of new institutions, these institutions may not take hold if they fail to address the external institutions within which the local authority is embedded. This is not to suggest that new institutions have to 'fit' into their larger environment as a 'harmonious whole' (Goodin, 1996, pp. 34-36). Here, the point is more about acknowledging that there is no 'design *de novo*'; institutions are *redesigned* against a backdrop of existing practices within and around local authorities (Goodin, 1996, p. 30).

The case study evidence suggests three findings in relation to this point. First, the values and norms associated with representative democracy placed constraints upon the design process and constituted a barrier to the use of the Internet for introducing new practices associated with alternative models of democracy. Although there were experiments to combine some elements of deliberative democracy (online discussion groups in Harborough), the national institutional context where institutions of representative democracy were dominant played a constraining role. Likewise, the national institutional context where the use of the Internet was sought mainly for managerial purposes had a constraining role on actors' perceptions of what was possible and desirable with the Internet. Partly because of these constraints, the design of institutions associated with electronic participation was secondary to the design of institutions associated with online service delivery.

Second, institutions relating to the citizenry were important in enabling and constraining design processes. Setting up institutions associated with electronic participation without acknowledging the properties of citizens, such as their lack of interest or their preference to use conventional channels of participation, is likely to obstruct the institutionalisation process. As Olsen (1997) suggests, the design of new institutions cannot be seen in isolation from the properties of the citizen. Third, economic institutions have to be recognised too. The availability of Internet access is highly dependent on economic wellbeing. Design initiatives need to recognise whether or not there is sufficient economic wellbeing and Internet access in the locality to support the new institutions and to ensure that they take hold. In some cases, respondents

complained about limited take up levels of the electronic consultation practices. At least on some occasions this may have stemmed simply from a lack of access to the Internet.

The need for clarity about values

Institutionalisation can be supported if the design process is underpinned by a clear, and preferably shared, set of values. There has to be clarity about not only the values that are *promoted*, but also the values that are *challenged* (emphasis added, Lowndes and Wilson, 2003, p. 281). Moreover, because institutionalisation is an ongoing process, value clarity has to be maintained over time (Lowndes and Wilson, 2003, p. 283). The case study research suggested that actors within local authorities were confused about values being promoted by the government. The sense of confusion was relevant both for the specific targets, such as those in relation to the BVPI 157²⁹ indicator, and for the values underpinning those targets, such as efficiency, high quality services or social inclusion.

In relation to the specific targets, an officer complained, “we don’t have a clear set of objectives. E-government has never been properly defined. It is quite difficult to achieve 100% of something you don’t know what it is” (Director of Resources, Oadby and Wigston). The officer e-champion in Wellingborough raised the same point, observing that the “signals coming out from the government are confusing. What should we be fulfilling in terms of what the government wants?” A Best Value Officer noted, “BVPI 157 has been completely confused about what we are going to put against that indicator and what is the government’s idea of what electronic services should be like. There seems to be some uncertainty” (Oadby and Wigston).

Chapter 8 discussed the significance of government regulations for local authorities’ strategies. The case studies showed that frequent changes in those regulations and frameworks created a sense of ‘initiative fatigue’ among actors. Commenting on the change from the Best Value to Comprehensive Performance Assessment, an officer

²⁹ Best Value Performance Indicator 157 was created in order to measure performance towards e-government targets. For more detail see Chapter 3.

complained: “the government again moved the rules. So they are saying forget about playing football, we are playing rugby” (Best Value Officer, Oadby and Wigston).

Although the specific targets and practices change, the values underpinning those targets may stay the same. In other words, the ‘hardware’ of rules, rights and operating procedures may change for practical reasons, but the ‘institutional software’ upon which that hardware depends may be the same (Dryzek, 1996, p. 104). However, the case studies showed that confusion among actors was not only about the specific targets but also about the values to be promoted. This was best exemplified by the confusion between e-government and e-democracy purposes and the almost interchangeable use of these concepts.

Moreover, because there were so many new initiatives in the local governance field at any one time, this created a feeling that some of these initiatives might disappear without finding the chance to become institutionalised. Some actors noted that the current trend concerning the use of the Internet might be just another ‘fashion’. The officer e-champion in Wellingborough was sceptical about the future of e-government. He noted, “there is a certain *element of fashion* in the way the ideas are informed. We don’t really know whether e-government will be a big thing in the future” (Officer e-champion, Wellingborough). This perception constitutes another barrier to the exploitation of the Internet and the institutionalised use of it.

The need for demonstrable results

Institutionalisation may be truncated gradually because of a lack of demonstrable results associated with a structure (Tolbert and Zucker, 1999, p. 178). The existence of demonstrable results is important for keeping the institutionalisation process going in two respects. First, it helps champions to convince opposition groups of the value of new institutions. Second, having these results keep champions motivated in their design efforts. Otherwise, the “lack of feedback would further depress expectations and impair action” (Lanzara, 1998, p. 6). Regarding the first point, the case study research showed that officers involved in the design process found it difficult to convince elected

members to spend on IT expenditures. Officers complained that e-democracy was not a priority for elected members anyway and that members were using the low response rates to electronic participation initiatives to justify their opposition.

Regarding the second point, the case study research demonstrated that when expectations about electronic participation were not met, this created a sense of disappointment. Many respondents pointed to the low take up levels of the electronic consultation initiatives and questioned whether there would ever be higher response rates. However, there was also a sense that what the councils had been doing in terms of electronic participation (and service delivery) was intended for future generations rather than for short-term gains. As the Leader in Wellingborough explained:

There are a lot of people who don't, and are unlikely to, actually use electronic services. But youngsters are sitting in front of computers and working with them. I think you've got a generational thing here. *You are talking about a big time scale. Everybody will take it for granted in time* (Leader, Wellingborough).

The need for demonstrable results motivated actors to focus on using the Internet for tangible benefits such as online service provision. This was considered to be important for attracting citizens who would not otherwise be interested in visiting a council website, for convincing members who were reluctant to spend public money on electronic consultation and for showing the government their progress towards 2005 service delivery targets. It is possible to suggest that the need for obtaining demonstrable results and short-term gains became a barrier to the use of the Internet for participation purposes, which was considered as more abstract and less tangible. This supports Offe's (1996) suggestion that in most cases design is motivated by outcome-oriented perspectives.

The need for successful examples (External legitimisation)

Institutionalisation is furthered when new institutions have acquired social meanings and are externally legitimised. Offe (1996) suggests that designers are more likely to succeed if they copy institutional arrangements with a high status and a good record

elsewhere. There is a snowball effect: the greater the number of people adopting a structure, the more legitimate it will be perceived to be; the more imitated it will be and, hence, the more widely institutionalised it will become. For this, however, there must be successful examples to follow. The research evidence showed that the existence of successful examples (or at least examples that are perceived as successful) helped designers to make decisions (e.g. the diffusion of community portals). Likewise, a lack of such examples left actors without any role model to follow. Reflecting this point very clearly, the Chief Executive in Wellingborough remarked that “I don’t think there is anywhere in Britain *a shiny example* of how the council is working that much better because of e-democracy”.

In many cases, actors mentioned that, although they could think of certain innovations, they needed some kind of external legitimisation before they would consider implementing any changes. In Harborough, the Chief Executive said that the council was already moving towards greater citizen involvement and that the national changes in terms of local government modernisation gave ‘legitimacy’ to that process. In Wellingborough, the ICT Manager reported that, although the council was thinking about establishing a call centre, they could only decide to do so after receiving the advice of external consultants. According to him, this was because “it still needed that necessary external motivation or someone standing there and asking why don’t you do this?”

There may be additional elements that would also contribute to further institutionalisation, such as successful championing and special funding, which have been discussed in the previous chapters to a certain extent. However, the case study research suggested that the above five factors were the most relevant. The design process of new rules and practices regarding electronic participation needs to acknowledge these elements in order to take hold. The following table summarises the institutional factors that worked for or against the new institutions associated with electronic participation in the three case study authorities. The table does not include the factors arising from the wider institutional environment, such as the institutions of representative democracy, since these factors are the same for all cases.

Table 10.1: Institutional factors working for or against the new institutions associated with electronic participation in the three case study authorities.

	<i>Supporting new institutions</i>	<i>Against new institutions</i>
Harborough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New institutions are justified both economically and socially (economically because it is cheaper to consult online for the council because of its rural nature, socially because e-consultation helps the council to reach out excluded parts of the locality) • External funding (pathfinder) • Successful championing • External legitimisation (in relation to community portals) 	E-government purposes being more important than institutions associated with electronic participation
Wellingborough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource dependence and government regulations • External legitimisation (in relation to community portals) • Turnover of actors (in relation to change in political control and the establishment of the community development department) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New institutions not justified socially because of concerns about social exclusion • Uncertainty and risks associated with change • Lack of successful examples
Oadby and Wigston	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource dependence and government regulations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New institutions are not justified economically (small budget and the need to run parallel services) or socially (fear of social exclusion) • Lack of clarity about values • Insufficient championing • Strong service delivery orientation • Overrepresentation of IT actors

CONCLUSIONS

Chapter 9 concluded that institutional change is difficult because of uncertainties, risks, transition costs and acquired normative meanings. This chapter further analysed the barriers to full institutionalisation. Analysing the extent to which the new rules and practices associated with electronic participation are institutionalised demonstrates that, despite some signs of habitualisation and objectification, there is no full institutionalisation. Four indicators signalling a lack of institutionalisation were identified. These were too much dependence on certain individuals, substantial variation between individuals and departments, strong opposition and the lack of taken for granted behaviour in relation to the new institutions. However, it has to be acknowledged that the research did not have a sufficient time span to observe the institutionalisation process for a long period.

Institutions are nested and there is a need for a wider programme that involves changes at other institutional levels, too, such as the nature of citizenry. The case study research also suggested that clarity about targets and values was an important factor in determining whether or not new institutions would take hold. When actors were confused about the purpose of the design, the values behind the design process and the specific targets they needed to achieve, the design process could be hampered. Finally, the research pointed at the importance of demonstrable results and external legitimisation for keeping the champions motivated and for minimising possible opposition to new institutions.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has analysed Internet-based strategies for the enhancement of political participation in the context of British local government. In particular, it has explored the extent to which the Internet is used by local authorities for participation purposes. The thesis has also identified the specific constraints upon the vision for electronic participation and democracy. The research demonstrated that local authorities' attitudes towards citizen participation and the Internet develop within an institutional context and that attitudes towards electronic participation are built on attitudes towards participation in general. The research found that the Internet is mostly perceived as an information provision and service delivery tool and that it is much less likely to be considered as a medium for stimulating citizen participation. The research also revealed a strong belief that electronic participation should only be an addition to, and not a replacement for, traditional methods of participation.

The research contributed to the e-democracy debate particularly in three ways. First, it linked the debates on the role of the Internet for enhancing participation with established theories of political participation by highlighting the significance of top-down mobilisation. Hence, the research argued that without political willingness and a deliberate intention to use the Internet for participation purposes, the Internet (or any other information and communication technology) would not automatically lead to enhanced participation. Second, the research considered the role of political equality as a principle of democracy and argued that structural inequalities are likely to undermine the vision for e-democracy. Third, by benefiting from established knowledge on political participation, the research argued that although some practical problems of participation can be ameliorated with the use of the Internet, normative arguments are *reproduced* in the context of the Internet. There is a large degree of continuity between attitudes towards participation *per se* and

towards electronic participation. The way the electronic participation models develop is highly influenced by existing norms and ideas around participation.

The research also identified a major paradox within the debates on the use of the Internet either for democratic or managerial purposes. Such debates generally anticipate rapid and transformative change that would follow the use of the Internet. Political science as a discipline, on the other hand, is more cautious and measured in its assessment of processes of change than technology-driven arguments. Unlike these technology-driven arguments, major political science perspectives generally suggest that inertia and stability are the norm in the public sector. In taking a political science perspective, the research balanced the enthusiasm about the possible 'impacts' of the Internet with a more incremental understanding of change. In adopting a meso-level approach, the research helped to analyse how systemic changes concerning the developments in the technology are converted into political behaviour in different organisations and institutional settings.

The research also avoided utopian and dystopian scenarios by adapting a middle way approach to technological development. This approach acknowledged certain characteristics of the Internet, but also emphasised the role of social shaping and construction both generally in the society and within the local government environment.

This final chapter first discusses the contribution of the research and then evaluates the limitations of the study and the potential for future research.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE RESEARCH

This section of the chapter discusses the contribution of the research in relation to three main themes:

- Scope for using the Internet for enhancing political participation
- Emerging patterns, issues and trends
- Scope for design of institutions associated with electronic participation

Scope for using the Internet for enhancing political participation

The research suggests that the scope for enhancing participation through the Internet is limited by two groups of factors. The first limitation is related to normative arguments against participation. The research suggests that debates on the role of the Internet for enhancing participation have to benefit from established knowledge on political participation in order to evaluate how the normative and practical arguments against participation can be ameliorated or reproduced with the use of the Internet. The research shows that although the Internet can potentially provide a solution to some of the practical problems of participation, the normative arguments against participation persist. The research shows that the attitudes of policy actors towards *electronic* participation build on their attitudes towards participation *per se*. Hence, problems such as equality in participating and the dilemma between participation and representation are reproduced in the context of electronic participation as well. The second limitation is related to perceptions of the Internet. The Internet is mostly perceived as a service delivery and information provision tool rather than a medium for the enhancement of political participation. Moreover, the use of the Internet introduced new concerns such as worries about losing personal contact with citizens. There is a belief that electronic communication should not replace traditional channels, especially face-to-face contact. These two groups of limitations are discussed in more detail below.

Normative arguments concerning participation: Still there

Because this research has been concerned with the strategies of local authorities in terms of participation, it was very important to understand the possible concerns of local authority actors about using the Internet for political participation purposes. The research shows that normative arguments concerning participation preserved their significance within the discussions of electronic participation as well. The research demonstrates that policy actors at the local level abstain from using the Internet for political participation purposes largely because of their concerns about excluding certain segments of the society, undermining the

role of the elected and appointed elite in policy decision making, and their perception that the people are not interested in participating anyway.

The Internet is more likely to advantage those who are already advantaged in terms of income, skills and access to political links, all of which are important predictors of participation. The most important concern about electronic participation is its potential to strengthen the voice of the usual group of politically active people and to deepen the exclusion of others. There is acknowledgement that increased electronic participation can constitute a threat to democracy when it is not distributed equally among different sections of society. Frequently, respondents highlighted the lack of participation in their consultation events, and the fact that they were always attended by the same people. This is in line with major studies on political participation which confirm that most of the existing participation comes from a small but active segment of society (Parry et al, 1992; Pattie and Johnston, 1998). In some cases, this very fact becomes a barrier to the design and implementation of participation initiatives. The paradox of participation and equality is further enhanced in the context of electronic participation. Rather than providing a solution to the problems of participation, the use of the Internet reproduces the problem of giving voice to the same groups of people whilst marginalizing the others. Moreover, the inequalities in the distribution of the Internet are not only about whether or not people have access to it. The use of the Internet introduces other kinds of inequalities stemming from varied levels of skills, confidence and inclination to use it.

The balance between participation and representation is at the heart of democratic theory. There are concerns that increased participation can pose a threat to the role of elected representatives by opening new channels of direct participation. While some elected representatives perceive participation as a threat to their role, appointed bureaucrats join them in saying that people would not be interested in participating or that the issues are too complicated to be open to people's participation. These arguments have existed for centuries (Plato, 1974; Schumpeter, 1976) and they are likely to persist in the context of the

Internet too. This again highlights the value of established knowledge on political participation for illuminating barriers to the development of electronic participation.

Another important barrier to the use of the Internet is related to a perceived lack of demand from citizens. It is almost a slogan among elected members and officers that 'people are not interested as long as their bins are emptied'. Lack of participation is seen as something related to the properties of the citizens (either they are not interested or they are happy) or to the fact that there are no big issues to attract people. Comments about the limited interest from citizens are usually raised as *complaints* about citizens. It is felt that there is only limited scope for changing citizens' attitudes. Because of this *perceived* lack of interest, there is a sense that the use of the Internet would not make much difference. Nevertheless, there is some optimism about the use of the Internet for the future generations.

Since the research did not focus on analysing the citizens' attitudes towards participation and electronic participation, it is hard to judge whether local authorities' perceptions of the citizenry are valid or not. However, in a sense this does not matter. Whether these perceptions are realistic or not, they have a real impact in shaping local authorities' strategies for using the Internet for political participation. It seems that there is a gap between local authorities and citizens that is confirmed by previous studies which contrast perceptions of local authorities and citizens on political participation (DETR, 1998a). This suggests the need for a wider reform programme to bridge the gap between people and local authorities and policy makers in general.

Perceptions of the Internet: A medium for political participation?

The second group of barriers to the use of the Internet for political participation arises from perceptions of the Internet. The research shows that the central aspects of the Internet for local authorities are the information provision and online service delivery aspects. The Internet is much less likely to be considered as a tool for stimulating citizen participation. The fact that many actors viewed the website as a 24/7 office is a good indication that the

councils perceive the website primarily as a tool for information provision and service delivery. The analysis of the websites also confirmed this tendency.

As discussed in Chapter 7, this can be explained by four factors. First, there is a 'perception' that there is no demand from citizens for the use of the Internet except for conducting online service related transactions. It is also believed that putting services online could attract people who would not otherwise be interested. Second, local authorities tend to see their role primarily as a service delivery organisation rather than a democratic body. Therefore, there is a preference to spend public money on 'tangible' benefits, particularly in the form of electronic services. Third, there are some signs that e-democracy could be seen as the next stage after achieving e-government goals. Therefore, local authorities have been concentrating on improving their technology infrastructure and providing basic services before they start planning how the Internet can be used for democratic purposes. The fourth factor is related to the national agenda. As discussed in Chapter 3, local authorities have to meet targets set by the government in relation to the provision of all their services electronically by the end of 2005. Therefore, there is a rush to meet the targets, and this prevents local authorities from finding their own ways of experimenting with the Internet for democratic purposes. It is worth noting that there are some exceptions to this; in certain special circumstances, such as pilot and pathfinder projects, councils are selected specifically to experiment with the democratic use of the Internet. This is not to ignore the value of electronic service delivery or to downgrade the importance of allowing people to consume electronic services and to obtain information online. However, it is important to point out that these developments do not lead to the enhancement of political participation.

In addition to these possible explanations, the failure to perceive the Internet as a participation medium can also arise from suspicions about the value of the Internet as the right medium to generate participation. This is related both to the fear of social exclusion and to the belief that participation should be about human interaction and meeting face-to-face.

The research shows that electronic participation opened a normative debate about the value and desirability of mechanisms that replace face-to-face communication between the council and the citizens. This echoes a similar debate among political scientists and communication scholars on the value of virtual and face-to-face contact (Putnam 2000; Falk, 1998). However, when it is considered that only a few of the existing consultation initiatives are in fact based on face-to-face communication, it is difficult to understand why the local authorities are so concerned about maintaining those relations. A possible explanation is that the value of face-to-face consultation surfaces only when actors start comparing it with electronic participation. Face-to-face communication is especially valuable at the local government level, which is often justified on the basis of being close to people. The research shows that there is almost a sense of pride among local authorities in this respect, especially in smaller authorities. The prospect of losing this special relationship due to an increase in the use of the Internet for communication purposes is considered with caution if not suspicion.

It is not a coincidence that the research has been focused on *perceptions* of the Internet. Although, Chapter 3 discussed the 'given' technical properties of the Internet that could potentially affect levels and styles of political participation, Chapter 4 argued that these properties are also socially *shaped* and *constructed*. Therefore, it is vital to analyse how these properties are constructed and shaped in different contexts. This is not to deny the given properties of the Internet. It is those properties that lead local authorities to experiment with electronic participation. For example, all local councils have websites. However, the increase in the use of websites is not only about the potential of the Internet; it is also related to the myth that surrounds the Internet. Having a website has become almost a norm and local authorities could not even think about not having one. The research also demonstrates that the Internet is interpreted differently in different contexts and differently depending on the individual interpreter, which echoes Pinch and Bijker's (1984) concept of 'interpretative flexibility' of technologies. The main actors responsible for developing the strategy about the use of the Internet bring their own ideas and experiences to the process of deciding how the Internet is going to be used. The government plays an

important role in shaping the use of the Internet by sponsoring certain applications, providing incentives for their use, by setting targets regarding how they are going to be used and by encouraging the diffusion of certain practices.

The research also raises an important policy question concerning the degree to which e-participation is necessary and meaningful at the *local* level. This paradox was apparent especially in one of the cases where respondents believed that their biggest asset was the close relationship with local citizens, which was enabled mostly by the geographic nature of the locality. The research restates the question: if the Internet is a medium for connecting people from anywhere *regardless of distance*, and if distance is not a problem, particularly in smaller localities, what is the point in electronic local participation? This is not to deny the significance of the efforts that have been made at the local level. However, the research suggests that there may be variations between localities in terms of the need and desire for electronic mechanisms. In this sense, a council that is resistant to the use of the Internet for citizen participation may utilise other, more conventional, mechanisms for participation. Their resistance may stem from a belief in the value of face-to-face relations with the community and the lack of need for electronic means of participation. This has important policy implications. First, electronic democracy at the local level requires large sums of investment, which can be questioned in terms of its economic justifiability. Second, although there is a strong commitment at the national level to using the Internet as part of a democratic renewal programme, not all local authorities are willing to go down this road at the same pace.

Emerging patterns, issues and trends

The use of the Internet by local authorities and the public sector in general introduces new issues and patterns. These are analysed in relation to three groups: models of democracy; the issue of digital divide; and changing power relations and the role of local government.

Models of democracy: representative or participatory?

The research concludes that instead of triggering a revolutionary change and introducing radical models of democracy, the Internet is being adapted within the parameters of representative democracy and works to enhance a consumer democracy model rather than participatory (direct or deliberative) models. The research demonstrates that values and norms associated with consumer democracy and representative democracy are important in shaping the strategy of local authorities. Analysing the three cases reveals a strong sense of responsibility for providing high quality services. The Internet is mainly seen as a tool that can be used to provide services in a better way. As such, it could be argued that norms and values associated with consumer democracy constitute a barrier to the use of the Internet for participation purposes. Actors are constrained in the sense that their understanding of what can be done with the Internet is highly shaped by a strong service delivery orientation. Associated with this service delivery orientation, all cases demonstrate a high degree of departmentalism, which is also a barrier to the development of corporate approaches to the use of the Internet for participation purposes. Actors' understanding of the Internet is constrained in the sense that they perceive the Internet as a tool to offer an additional channel, and hence 'choice', for providing services. The websites of the councils are perceived as alternative 24/7 offices that customers can choose to use whenever they want.

The research also demonstrates that in all cases, norms and values embedded in and supported by representative democracy play an important role in the development of new institutions for enhancing participation including the use of the Internet for this purpose. The most important value in this sense is 'equality'. There is a high level of awareness about issues concerning equality. The most important normative concern about participation is related to social exclusion. Actors are constrained by a logic of appropriateness that encourages them to think the following: "we have to include everyone; however, electronic participation may lead to exclusion of certain groups; hence, it may not be appropriate". However, participation is also a desired value for democracy. Some actors believe it is 'part and parcel' of their job. It has a strong normative appeal. Therefore, in a

sense, political actors try to accommodate two conflicting but desired values embedded in the representative democracy.

Representative democracy provides a framework within which actors decide what is desirable and feasible with the use of the Internet. Because participation is associated with elections and voting (as opposed to let us say a grassroots mode of participation such as protest), actors' understanding of electronic participation is almost completely limited to e-voting. The fact that participation is perceived within the parameters of representative democracy is also a barrier to its use for radical models of democracy. To take an example, although the Internet offers online referendum possibilities, this application was not mentioned once, either by officers or by councillors. Unsurprisingly, the use of the Internet for electronic voting was raised many times by both officers and councillors as a way of using the new technologies in enhancing citizen participation. This is related to the fact that referendums are not part of the established context either in the UK in general or in the British local government in particular. Nevertheless, there are some developments, such as the emergence of online discussion forums on local authority websites, which may support a deliberative model of democracy. However, their impact is very limited, especially because of low take up levels. The fact that only a few people participate in online discussions causes scepticism about their value as a discussion platform.

Despite the huge literature on the possibilities of enhancing direct and deliberative democracy through the Internet (e.g. Budge, 1996; Dahlberg, 2001; Gimmler, 2001), there has not been much development towards these models. Considering the embedded nature of institutions, this is not surprising. It is unlikely that deliberative or direct models of democracy would develop at the local level given that it is part of a national system based on a representative democracy model. In short, although at a theoretical level, there is much anticipation about the role of the Internet for reviving the public sphere, leading to increased deliberation and participation and supporting alternative/participatory models of democracy, this anticipation will not become a reality until there is a policy deliberately aimed at making it so.

Digital divide: the unexplored dimension

The issue of digital divide has been discussed extensively both in academic and policy terms (Bonfadelli, 2002; Dijk, 2000; OECD, 2001). Echoing these, this research also shows that the vision of e-democracy is undermined by social inequalities and a concern that adapting electronic participation channels would lead to further exclusion of certain groups of citizens. However, this research shows that the issue of digital divide does not apply only to citizens; it applies to officers and elected members as well. There has been a divergence between elected members who use the Internet extensively to communicate with citizens (which is a small minority) and those who do not use it at all. This may have important implications for introducing a digital divide issue between elected members.

Reflecting the tendency in the academic debate, this is not acknowledged as a potential problem by policy actors. Elected members are simply seen as not interested in the technology, which is often explained in relation to their age profile. This is not to suggest that councillors do not use the Internet at all, some of them do. But this is precisely the problem: the fact that some councillors are much better than others at using the Internet to communicate with their electorate introduces yet another divide, this time between members themselves. This is not merely an internal issue for local authorities; it has significant implications for the practice of representative democracy as a whole. The use of the Internet by elected members to communicate with citizens creates the possibility of changing the nature of the relationship between citizens and their representatives.

Moreover, the unequal use of the Internet by elected members introduces inequalities between different locations. This in turn contributes to a further widening of the digital divide. It was beyond the limits of this study to investigate the kinds of elected members most likely to use the Internet to communicate with their electorate. However, some findings did suggest the significance of age. Younger members tend to be more familiar with using the Internet. The important point is that if there are variations depending on the locality, there is a possibility that people living in certain areas would have more opportunities to contact their representatives electronically than those living in other areas.

The use of the Internet (or not) creates inequalities between organisations as well as individual actors. Some public organisations, including local authorities, may exploit the Internet more effectively than others. This may create inequalities in terms of their relation with central government, other public agencies and citizens. While some organisations are rewarded for their progress, others may be punished for lagging behind. Those that are left behind are likely to face a legitimacy problem, especially when the use of the Internet becomes a dominant norm. This again points to possibly the most fundamental issue of central-local government relations. Should all local authorities be following the same route in using the Internet for political participation, or should they take their own path?

Another important policy issue concerns the limitations of what can be done for fighting social inequalities. Although both local authorities and the national governments try to invest in programmes to fight the digital divide (such as providing community access points, IT training programmes and so on), there is an argument that the cost of such projects is not economically justifiable, since the people benefiting from such programmes would not participate anyway. Such arguments suggest that there may be deeper reasons for non-participation stemming from a lack of trust in political institutions.

Changing power relations and the role of local government

The research shows that there is a tendency for the design of electronic participation initiatives to be 'hijacked' by certain actors, such as senior IT and Finance officers. Elected members have been largely excluded either because they are not interested in technology (which may be related to their age profile or unawareness of the potential for using the Internet), or because the e-government agenda is driven by a small group of people especially chief executives, directors of finance and senior IT actors. Therefore, there are changes in the balance between officers and councillors.

Actors who might have promoted the use of the Internet for participation purposes, such as members of community development departments, are not included in developing

strategies. This provides a partial explanation of why the Internet is mostly seen as a service provision tool. However, the causal relation may work the other way around too. In other words, because the Internet is seen mostly as a service provision tool, actors who would promote participation outcomes may not be involved.

This has significant implications for the role of local government. The research suggests that service delivery related outcomes are likely to be perceived as more important than participation and democracy outcomes as a result of the overrepresentation of certain actors such as those with IT roles who are more likely to seek 'tangible' benefits and in certain cases perceive 'politics' as unnecessary. This gives rise to a potential problem of overlooking the democratic role of local government as opposed to its service delivery role. For example, the increasing influence of IT actors may have negative impacts in terms of the potential neglect of significant social issues associated with using the technology (e.g. digital divide) if their involvement is not balanced with the involvement of people with a social background.

Although citizen participation constitutes an important part of the democratic renewal programme of the government (DETR 1998; DTLR, 2001), the research argues that the potential for using the Internet for democratic purposes appears to be marginalized *vis-à-vis* managerial and service delivery-oriented purposes. In terms of the role of elected local government, this means that different roles of local government are supported asymmetrically. Its service delivery role benefits more from the use of the Internet than does its democratic role. However, this is not to suggest that the Internet itself favours any particular role played by the local government. On the contrary, these developments reflect the general tendency in British local government to be primarily concerned with delivering good services. It also reflects the influence of the dominant e-government narrative within the central government, which is supported by formal rules and resource distribution.

Scope for design of institutions associated with electronic participation

The research demonstrates that there is a deliberate attempt and a vision to shape the use of the Internet for enhancing political participation. There is scope for designing institutions associated with electronic participation, but the scope is limited. The arguments and findings of the research are summarised in relation to the limitations of wider and internal institutional environments. The section then evaluates whether design is possible.

Limitations of the wider institutional environment

Limitations of the wider environment can be analysed in relation to three themes: the role of the central government, the parameters of representative democracy, and the properties of the citizenry. Regarding the role of central government, it is possible to argue that the government plays a trigger role in pushing local authorities to use the Internet. The government affects local authorities' strategy through the distribution of resources. The government supports the creation and maintenance of new institutions by passing legislation, providing incentives for certain practices and punishing non-compliance. Written regulations require local authorities to establish new structures, to create new roles, and to adopt new patterns of behaviour in relation to the use of the Internet. The government also affects local authorities' strategies through the creation of values and norms that local authorities feel they have to comply with. Values such as 'modern', 'efficient', 'partnership', 'participation' and 'social inclusion' are embedded in several policies and they create guidelines for local authorities. In this sense, central government plays a trigger role for the use of the Internet. However, Chapters 2 and 3 discussed the fact that, among those values, efficiency and providing high quality services have been the most dominant. It appears that the national political environment and its dominant narrative based on e-government purposes become a barrier to the use of the Internet for democratic purposes. This is not to deny the importance of the government's policies in encouraging participation outcomes, which are discussed in Chapter 2 and 3. The point is that, although citizen participation constitutes an important part of the democratic renewal programme,

the research revealed that the potential for using the Internet for democratic purposes appeared to be marginalized *vis-à-vis* managerial and service delivery-oriented purposes.

Regarding the parameters of representative democracy, the research argues that the values and norms associated with representative democracy places constraints upon the design process and constitutes a barrier to the use of the Internet for introducing new practices associated with alternative models of democracy. Although there are experiments aimed at combining some elements of deliberative democracy, the national institutional context, in which institutions of representative democracy are dominant, plays a constraining role.

Concerning the properties of the citizenry, the thesis argues that institutions relating to the citizenry are important in enabling and constraining design processes. Setting up institutions associated with electronic participation without acknowledging the properties of citizens, such as their lack of interest or preference to use conventional modes of participation, is likely to obstruct the institutionalisation process. The research demonstrated that when the local authorities could not obtain a sufficient response to their electronic participation initiatives, this created a sense of disappointment which in turn leads to questioning of whether there will ever be higher respond rates.

The limitations of the wider institutional environment indicate the need for a more extensive design, which involves introducing changes in the attitudes of the citizenry as well as the elected and appointed elite regarding increased participation. The research reveals that one important barrier to using electronic participation is the existence of normative concerns about participation, especially a perceived lack of interest on the part of citizens. The extensive reform programme should also address economic institutions. Design initiatives need to recognise that there should be sufficient economic well-being and Internet access in the locality to support the use of the Internet for participation purposes.

Limitations of the internal institutional environment

Limitations of the internal institutional environment can be analysed in relation to conflicts of values and the need for an economic justification for electronic participation. Concerning the conflict of values, the research suggests that 'participation' and 'equality' are regarded as two values which are difficult to realise at the same time. For this reason, even when local authorities are willing to establish institutions associated with electronic participation, they need to maintain their old structures in order to provide equal opportunities. A similar conflict is identified between the values of 'efficiency' and 'care'. Local authorities display a willingness to benefit from the Internet in terms of efficiency, but there is also a concern that they may lose their identity as being close to people.

The need to maintain the existing channels of participation brings us to the second limitation, which concerns the economic justification of electronic participation initiatives. Smaller local authorities in particular feel disadvantaged in terms of their financial strength in applying electronic participation initiatives in addition to their existing participation channels. This feeling echoes Pratchett and Leach's (2003) point that the national e-government strategy penalises smaller local authorities because these authorities require the same technological base as larger authorities. Moreover, when good service delivery is perceived as the ultimate goal of the council, the money spent on electronic consultation is largely seen as wasted. There are also concerns that it is not worth the cost considering the number of people that actually use electronic means of participation. The fact that councils receive very limited response to their online consultation constitutes a barrier to the use of the Internet for participation purposes. The justification of electronic participation is also related to the geography of the local authority. In some cases, there is a sense that there is no need for electronic participation if the locality is small enough for people to have easy access to the council offices.

Is design possible?

In spite of these constraints, new institutions *can* be designed. This is more likely to be achieved through layering, patch working or *bricolage* (Lanzara, 1998) techniques that supplement, extend, or rearrange existing institutions rather than radically replacing them. Actors within local authorities are at pains to explain that they are not trying to 'replace' any of the existing channels of participation, that they are only 'adding' new ones. In this way, opposition to new institutions is minimised and problems of legitimacy and distrust are overcome. Because of these *bricolage* and 'layering' (Thelen, 2003) techniques, there exist a range of old and new institutions operating together. While the traditional institutions of participation, such as elections and public meetings are retained, new institutions of participation such as panels and online discussion forums are built. However, the real challenge concerns the institutionalisation of these new arrangements so as to make them part of the 'standard operating procedure' (Hall, 1986) of local authorities. Although actors are aware that they could make better use of the Internet for enhancing citizen participation, new roles and ways of doing things with the Internet are not yet taken for granted.

The thesis argues that in order to enhance the institutionalisation of the use of the Internet for participation purposes, there is a need for a wider reform programme that recognises the external institutions within which the local authority is embedded. This is not to suggest that new institutions have to 'fit' into their larger environment. Here, the point is more about acknowledging that there is no 'design *de novo*'; institutions are 'redesigned' against a backdrop of existing practices within and around local authorities (Goodin, 1996, p. 30). Hence, existing institutions concerning the citizens and the way democracy is conceptualised have to be recognised during the design of new institutions associated with electronic participation.

The design process is likely to be accelerated when there exist institutional arrangements with a high status and a good record elsewhere (Offe, 1996). The greater the number of

people adopting a structure, the more legitimate it will be perceived to be; the more imitated it will be and, hence, the more widely institutionalised it will become. (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). For this, however, there must be successful examples to follow. The research showed that the existence of successful examples (or at least examples that are perceived as successful) help designers to make decisions (e.g. the diffusion of community portals). In terms of policy implications, this highlights the value of pilot and pathfinder projects that would encourage the development of such successful examples, since local authorities (especially smaller ones) are inadequately equipped (in terms of finance, technical expertise and human resources) to conduct experiments with the Internet for participation purposes.

Finally, the research demonstrates that the debate on the use of the Internet should not be a debate on the technical properties of the Internet or managerial issues concerning the informatization process within the public sector. There should be a clear vision about what it is that local authorities, as well as other public organisations, want to do with the Internet. Do they want to use the Internet for improving public services, providing information about policy issues, opening direct participation channels for citizens, encouraging political deliberation among citizens, etc? More importantly, institutionalisation can be supported if the design process is underpinned by a clear, and preferably shared, set of values. There must be clarity about not only the values that are *promoted*, but also the values that are *challenged* (emphasis added, Lowndes and Wilson, 2003, p. 281). This calls for a debate aimed at clarifying the nature of the values and principles that underpin contemporary democracies. Only after this can we begin to assess the value of the Internet as a device useful for 'enacting' democracy (Saward, 2003).

DEVELOPING THE APPROACH FURTHER

Since the research adopted a top-down approach and focused deliberately on local authorities' perspectives on enhancing participation, the *citizens'* perspective has not been explored. This is an important limitation because whatever the local authorities have been doing with the Internet only makes sense when they are understood or used by citizens. Although the research does provide some evidence about the take up levels of electronic initiatives drawing upon information gathered through the interviews, it does not actually reflect what the public thinks about these initiatives. So, for example when the barriers to the institutionalisation of electronic participation are discussed, potential barriers stemming from the citizens' side are not considered. Some speculations have been made, particularly in relation to the limited interest on the part of citizens as well as issues of social exclusion and digital divide. Although they are indicative, they are far from being systematic evaluations. Therefore, the perspective of citizens is a complementary project for future research. This could be done through a research design that examines how individuals and voluntary organisations perceive the Internet (i.e. as a tool for private purposes such as emailing friends and buying goods and services or as a tool that can be used for political purposes). In addition to investigating perceptions of the Internet, such a research design could also investigate actual modes of Internet usage.

Another limitation is concerned with the way in which participation is conceptualised. The definition that is used in the research mostly covers contacting officials (officers and elected members). Certain modes of participation, such as online campaigning, were excluded. Therefore, the results of the research have to be treated carefully. Had other modes of participation been included, the results might have been different. Future research may investigate other modes of participation, such as political campaigning, and the ways in which these modes are shaped by the use of the Internet.

In terms of the generalisability of the results, there may be some limitations, particularly in relation to the exclusion of county councils and the selection of the councils from localities in the East Midlands. Research evidence suggests that county councils have better

mechanisms for enhancing participation probably due to having larger budgets (Lowndes et al, 2001). Further research by ODPM (2002) also confirms that county and metropolitan councils and London boroughs appear to be more active than district councils, especially in initiating innovative and resource-intensive participation methods.

Considering that electronic participation projects require large amounts of investment, it is likely that studying county councils instead of second-tier authorities might have produced different findings. However, as this research demonstrates, barriers to implementing e-participation usually stem from institutional factors, although having resources is also important. Studying county councils would have produced different results also because they cover larger areas than district councils (geographically), which makes them more suitable for using the Internet, both for political participation and for service delivery purposes.

Existing research also shows that regions may vary significantly in terms of the use of the Internet by local authorities, political parties and politicians. For example, Uhm Seung-Yong and Hague (2001) demonstrate that MPs from London and Southeast England are much more likely to use email and have a website. This might be because these councils have fewer worries about the 'digital divide' due to high levels of Internet access.

Therefore, selection of cases from these regions with higher Internet penetration may have generated different findings. The selection of the cases also served some specific purposes. For example, Harborough was selected as a case study because of its Pathfinder status and in relation to the potential of this innovative institutional arrangement. This probably limits the generalisability of its findings. However, an element of 'purposeful sampling' (Maxwell, 1996, p. 70) was utilised in order to highlight the role of resources and innovation during institutional design. In short, the cases may not be generalisable to the whole universe of local authorities, but their theoretical findings can be expanded to other cases. In this sense, the theoretical framework can be applied to other institutions and public organisations such as political parties and the health service.

Methodologically, the research provides thick qualitative data rather than relying on survey data, which would not allow for the same degree of explanation building and analysis. The research also develops a framework for website analysis starting from the purposes of the research rather than the properties of the Internet. This is a major break from the dominant approaches in the literature. The method and the results of the website analysis can be tested in the context of other local authorities and public organisations by extending the framework through a survey approach.

The research extends institutional theory by applying its tools in explaining the development of the electronic participation strategies of local government. In this sense, it builds on previous work on the informatization of the public sector, which was also based on institutionalist approaches (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998; Fountain, 2001). However, it differs from these studies by focusing specifically upon participation and democracy, rather than analysing informatization as a whole. In conceptualising democratic renewal, and the related use of the Internet as an institutional design process, the research demonstrates the constraints upon change and suggests further arrangements that are likely to support the institutionalisation process. Institutional theory has been particularly useful in three ways. First, the institutional approach provides a counter argument against approaches that emphasise rapid change. But this is not stating the obvious. Institutionalism also helps in identifying barriers to the use of the Internet for participation purposes. In this way, it provides the tools to explain the process of change and continuity at the same time.

Second, the institutional approach helps in identifying the dual tendencies of homogenisation and variation among local authorities in terms of their strategies for using the Internet. Homogenisation is enhanced by coercive isomorphic processes stemming mainly from the central government as well as normative and mimetic isomorphic processes stemming largely from the local governance field. However, local authorities also have their own values and norms, symbols and myths, which affect individual behaviour. This internal context combined with pressures coming from the locality leads to differing definitions of participation, differing understandings of the Internet and differing strategies

in using the Internet for participation purposes. In this sense, an institutionalist approach enables an analysis of how given definitions in the literature (e.g. participation and consultation) and the objective properties of the Internet (e.g. interactivity, narrow casting) can be shaped differently in different contexts.

Third, an institutional analysis enables the linking of structure and agency by focusing on the *interaction* between institutions and actors rather than on seeking a one-way relation. In this way, it shows that actors' strategy in using the Internet is constrained and enabled by their institutional environment. However, their ideas and behaviours are not totally determined by that environment. The thesis argues that there is both an ongoing evolutionary process of change regarding political participation and a deliberate attempt by certain actors to shape this process.

Despite these benefits, adapting an institutionalist approach has some limitations. The first problem is related to understanding how individual behaviour is actually influenced by institutions. It is relatively simple to observe the interactions with regulative rules since they are usually formal and written. However, the normative and cognitive dimensions of institutions are more difficult to observe. Cognitive institutions are those that are taken for granted. By definition, it is impossible to observe them because even participants themselves are not aware of them. Future research may use methods from social psychology in order to reveal how individuals interact with institutions without being aware of them. The second and possibly more fundamental problem is related to explaining the incoherence and ambiguities of the institutional environment within which local authority actors operate. On one side, it is possible to suggest that the impact of institutions on actors' behaviour is not complete and final and hence there may be incoherence and ambiguities between individuals and departments in relation to their attitudes towards participation and the use of the Internet. However, this suggestion may be indicative of a major deficit in institutional theory. If institutionalism cannot explain actors' behaviour by reference to institutions, the theory loses its explanatory power. This problem remains at

the heart of the debate on 'structure' and 'agency' and requires much more theoretical and empirical investigation.

The research is also limited in terms of the period over which the institutionalisation of new rules and practices associated with electronic participation was observed. Processes of institutionalisation require long periods. Ideally, it should be observed over generations of actors in order to see if rules change with the turnover of actors or if they are sufficiently institutionalised to stay. Moreover, the use of the Internet in the public sector is a new phenomenon, although ICTs have been used for other purposes for a long time. Future research can analyse this process over a longer period.

Despite these theoretical and methodological limitations, the thesis makes an original contribution to the debate, especially by linking the recent debate on the use of the Internet with established knowledge on political participation and democracy. Drawing on this knowledge, the thesis argues that although some practical problems of participation can be ameliorated with the use of the Internet, normative concerns are reproduced in the context of the Internet. Drawing on social shaping of technology arguments and new institutionalism literature, the thesis also argues that the use of the Internet is shaped differently in different institutional settings. Without political willingness and a deliberate intention to use the Internet for participation purposes, the use of the Internet does not introduce rapid and transformative change in terms of levels and style of political participation. It is necessary to build new practices and procedures around the use of the Internet that can embody and bring the principles of participation and equality to life.

APPENDIX 1

SAMPLE CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEWS

Before each interview, interviewees were asked to read and sign the consent form to ensure that they understand the purpose of the research and they consent the interview to be taped.

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

The utilisation of the Internet by local authorities for participatory purposes

This interview is part of the PhD programme of the researcher that aims to examine the utilisation of the Internet by local authorities to enhance citizens' participation. The information gained in this interview will be used, alongside other research methods, to explore the degree that the Internet is exploited by local authorities in England. It will be used exclusively for the purposes of academic research, as the empirical basis of the PhD thesis as well as academic articles or conference papers.

Each interview will be taped (subject to consent) and copies of the tapes analysed later. A summary of the discussion will also be created by the researcher, based on notes taken during or immediately after the interview.

All interviews will be treated in the strictest confidence. Information will not be passed on between interviews or to any third party. In publishing findings from the research, every attempt will be made to respect the confidentiality of respondents.

CONSENT

I consent to be interviewed as part of this project and for my responses to be recorded and used in accordance with the framework set out above. I also consent to the interview being taped (delete if not appropriate).

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher: _____

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APPENDIX 3

**INTERVIEW SCHEDULES
(FOR ELECTED MEMBERS/COUNCILLORS)**

CONFIDENTIAL

**The utilisation of the Internet by local authorities for participatory purposes
Case Study Notes**

Name:

Role:

Location:

Date:

Interview number:

INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Highlight the distinctive features of this interview and any major contributions it might make to understand the theoretical arguments (e.g. Institutions, design, councillors versus officers in decision making, perceptions of participation, distinction between e-government and e-democracy)

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

How long have you been serving as a councillor? What is your role in the council e.g. in terms of serving in the committees and relations with the public?

THE COUNCIL AND THE PUBLIC

- Can you tell me about your relation with the public? How do you communicate with them? Through the council or through your own channels such as surgery hours?
- Are you involved in the events organised by the council such as forums?
- What kind of participatory initiatives do you have such as forums, panels, juries, surgeries etc? How well organised are they? How are they developed within the council? Are they usually initiated by the councillors or officers?
- In your opinion, is there a vibrant society in terms of participation? Do you receive lots of inquiries, complaints or feedback?

ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

- What has your council been doing about electronic democracy?
- Why do you think e-democracy is important? What are the benefits for the council or the citizens?
- How is the take up levels from the citizens, are they heavily used or not? For example do you get lots of emails from citizens or do they prefer to contact you by phone or face to face?
- What are the most important factors that drive e-government? What makes you try to implement it? Is it because of central government demands, or are there some people in the council who want to push it?
- What kinds of external factors can you think of which affects your strategy about e-democracy? For example, central government or other local authorities. Do you think the council is under pressure to catch up with technology or some best practice authorities in this field?

- Do you know about the IEG Statement? Who prepared it? What was your involvement? What about other councillors?
- Do you feel that you are involved in council decision-making?
- How did you become the e-champion? (Only for e-champions)

WEBSITE

- Have you seen the council website? What is the main purpose of having a website? Do you think your website achieves this purpose or does it need improvement?
- Do you invite citizen feedback on services and policy making on your website? Some authorities have online discussion groups, questionnaires etc? Do you think it is useful? Do you have or plan to have such facilities or do you prefer more traditional ways of dealing with people, like face to face?
- Do you have an email address? How did you learn to use email? Privately or through the council training?
- Do you think this locality is a wealthy place and people use the Internet extensively or not? What groups are you targeting to reach using the Internet? What groups do you think might be excluded in this process?
- How do you think this council differs from others?
- During the time you served as a councillor what was the biggest change you observed?
- Where do you see this council in five years time?
- Every council develops services according to needs and concerns in their locality. How do you think this place affect you as an organisation? What kind of issues you have to address, in what ways you have to work?

APPENDIX 3

**INTERVIEW SCHEDULES
(FOR OFFICERS)**

CONFIDENTIAL

**The utilisation of the Internet by local authorities for participatory purposes
Case Study Notes**

Name:

Role:

Location:

Date:

Interview number:

INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Highlight the distinctive features of this interview and any major contributions it might make to understand the theoretical arguments (e.g. Institutions, design, councillors versus officers in decision making, perceptions of participation, distinction between e-government and e-democracy).

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

How long have you been working here and what is your role in the authority?

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE AREA

Talking about this area, what do you think about the following?

- **Is it a vibrant society in terms of participation and voluntary work?**
- **Is social exclusion an issue in the area (causing from existence of deprived areas, large ethnic groups)?**

THE COUNCIL AND THE PUBLIC

- **In your opinion how is the attitude of the council toward participation? Do you think you have a tradition that encourages participation or not?**
- **If yes, why do you consult people? Where does it come from (it has always been like that, it is the current political control or government demands about increasing participation etc)**
- **If no, where does it come from (people do not participate anyway, costly, makes decision-making slower, political control)**
- **How would you define consultation and participation?**
- **Has there been any major change in the council in the last years that might have affected its strategy towards participation, e.g. political control or management? How did it affect participation initiatives and the internal culture of the council?**
- **Do you think political control is important? What do you think about the councillors' involvement in participatory projects? Do they encourage, discourage? Are they involved?**
- **What kind of participatory initiatives do you have such as forums, panels, juries, and surgeries? How well organised are they? How are they developed within the council?**
- **How is the take up levels? Are people interested? What kinds of issues are consulted?**
- **How do you evaluate the feedback coming from consulting initiatives? What kinds of mechanisms are there to incorporate them in decision-making?**
- **Do you have any partnerships with other authorities, organisations in developing and implementing participation projects? Do you work with other departments for joint projects?**

ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

- What has your council been doing about electronic democracy? When did the first initiatives start and why?
- Are you involved in any project related to using the Internet? For example in your website or community portals?
- What do you know about the council's websites? Are there any features for consultation/participation? What more could be done in the website?
- What are the current projects in the authority using the Internet? (Website, email, other)
- What affects these projects have on council's relations with the community? Negative or positive?
- Do you think people in this area would use the online participation methods if they were offered by the council? Or do you think they might prefer face-to-face interaction?
- How is the take up levels from the citizens, are they heavily used or not?
- Do you think the Internet is the right medium to give people the opportunity to participate? Or do you prefer methods that are more traditional?
- What are the most important factors that drive e-government? What makes you try to implement it?
- What are the structural or day-to-day barriers in implementing e-participation?
- Is there any consultation going on to receive community opinions on e-participation?
- What would you understand from e-democracy? What is e-democracy?
- What is e-government?
- We have been talking about the council's attitude and policies made about e-democracy. What about actors in the council; who makes decisions? Is it a working group meeting regularly, is it more *ad hoc*, or depending on some influential individuals? For example, who prepared the IEG Statement? What about implementation and scrutiny?
- What is the degree of councillor involvement? Are they interested and involved, or is it more a council staff initiative?

- What kinds of external factors can you think of which affects your strategy about e-democracy? For example, central government or other local authorities.
- Do you have any partnerships with other authorities, organisations in developing and implementing electronic democracy projects? What is the nature of the partnership?
- What groups do you think might be excluded in electronic way of providing services or inviting participation?
- Does the council have any initiatives to deal with this problem (such as provide public access points, training etc)?

WEBSITE

- What is the main purpose of having a website? Do you think your website achieves this purpose or does it need improvement? When you compare it with others how do you find it?
- Some authorities have online discussion groups, questionnaires? Do you think it is useful or do you prefer more traditional ways of dealing with people, like face to face?
- Do you invite citizen feedback on services and policy making on your website? How is the take up levels?
- Are there any attempt to publicise your website in general and the online consultation methods in particular? For example by using the local media or your own newsletter?
- Who maintains the website? Who supplies & decides on the content, makes the updates etc? Different departments separately, a group of staff responsible for the website or the IT people?

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

How does this council differ from other councils? Positive or negative?

Where do you see the council in five years?

What is the most important value?

APPENDIX 4
LIST OF ANALYSED DOCUMENTS

Wellingborough Borough Council

Implementing Electronic Government Statement 1, 2001

Implementing Electronic Government Statement 2, 2002

Oadby and Wigston Borough Council

Implementing Electronic Government Statement 1, 2001

Implementing Electronic Government Statement 2, 2002

Harborough District Council

Implementing Electronic Government Statement 1, 2001

Implementing Electronic Government Statement 2, 2002

WEBSITE ANALYSIS, First round, March 21, 2003

	21.03.2003	21.03.2003	21.03.2003
	Oadby-Wigston	Wellingborough	Harborough
Participation and Consultation			
Can you find any of the following in the website			
General email	no	yes	yes
Online polls	yes	no	yes
Questionnaires	no	no	yes
Feedback form	yes	no	yes
Complaint form	yes	no	no
Form to comment on the website	yes	no	yes
Form to contact a councillor	yes	no	no
Discussion forum	no	no	yes
Are there any guidelines about how to comment on an issue online or otherwise?	some information on the complaint procedure		yes (for forums and complaint procedure)
Is there any list of current consultations?	no	no	yes
Is there any list of previous consultations and their results?	no	yes	yes
Methodology of the consultation	NA	yes	yes
What did people say?	NA	all plans helped to develop the master plan	yes (5000 random questionnaires, 28% response)

What did council do?	NA	an illustrative master plan is on the website	yes (members considered the results)
Is there any invitation to be subscribed for a mailing list for consultation?	no	no	no
Is there any information about offline consultation of the council?	only through the press releases	no	yes, budget consultation results
Is there any information (date, place, agenda) about the forthcoming meetings such as:			
Council meetings	yes	yes	yes
Committee meetings	yes	yes	yes
Forums (Community, rural, multiethnic, senior citizens)	no	yes	yes
Tenant forum	no	yes	no
User groups	no	no	no
Surgery hours	no	no (1 out of 6 wards, also MP)	no
Is there any clear commitment about how the council will respond to the feedback and what should the participant expect from the council?	yes, customer care policy about written and telephone queries	no	yes, complaint procedure
Is there any information on how to contact the council in other methods such as telephone, fax or by visiting the council, opening hours?	yes	yes	yes
Local democracy			
Is there any information about political control of the council?	no	no	no
Is there a list of councillors by name or ward?	yes	yes	yes
Can you find any of the following information for councillors?			
Date of joining	no	no	yes

Party membership	yes but difficult to find under elections 1999	yes	yes
Committee membership	yes	yes	no
Activities outside the council, e.g. Membership of union/voluntary organisations	yes	no	no
Can you find the contact details of councillors?			
Name	yes	yes	yes
Ward/constituency boundaries	yes	yes	yes
Telephone	yes	yes	yes
Address	yes	no	yes
Email	yes (8 out of 26)	yes (22 out of 34)	yes (26 out of 37)
Surgery hours	no	yes (1 out of 6 wards)	no
Through the council website by filling a form	yes	no	no
Is there any information about how the council works?	no	no	no
Basic information about what is a councillor, MP, officer	no	no	no
Their service length, responsibilities, code of conduct	no	no	no
The role of executive and the scrutiny	no	no	no
Political management structure (committee, cabinet, mayoral system)	no	no	no
Can you find information related to elections?	yes	no	yes
Information about the elections in general	yes	no	yes
Results of the last elections (by ward, political party, turnout)	yes	no	no
Election timetable	no	no	yes
FAQ about elections	no	no	no but lots of general info

Candidates	no	no	no
Polling stations	no	no	no
Information on electronic voting or other innovative ways	yes	no	yes (postal/proxy)
Apply to join the electoral register	yes	no	yes
Download an application form to join the electoral register to be sent by post	no	yes	yes
Are there any email addresses of the council staff?	no	yes	yes
Does the authority clearly state how the emails will be dealt?	yes through information on customer care policy which probably includes email correspondence too	no	no
Can you download any of the following from the website?			
IEG Statements	yes	yes	yes
Best Value Plans	yes	yes	yes
Community Plan/Local Plan	no	yes	yes
Annual reports of councillors	no	no	no
Budget briefings	no	no	no
Press releases	yes	yes	yes
Constitution	yes	no	yes
Can you find information about Committees?			
Membership	yes	yes	no
Agendas	only upon email request	no	yes
Reports/ Documents/Minutes	no	no	no
Meeting Calendar	yes	yes	yes

Usability/Accessibility			
Is the website up to date?	there was an invitation for an event on the previous week	seems to be, last press release 04.03	last update 03.03
Are there facilities to make navigation easier?			
Site map	no	no	yes
Search	no	no	no
A - Z list	yes but not detailed	yes	yes
Are there facilities to increase the accessibility of the site?			
Text only version	no	no	no
Information on other languages	only a little in housing section	no	no
Facilities for visual impairment	no	no	no

WEBSITE ANALYSIS, Second round, October 22, 2003

	22/10/2003	22/10/2003	22/10/2003
	Oadby-Wigston	Wellingborough	Harborough
Participation and Consultation			
Can you find any of the following in the website			
General email	no	yes	yes
Online polls	no	no	yes
Questionnaires	no	yes	yes
Feedback form	yes	no	yes
Complaint form	yes	no	yes
Form to comment on the website	yes	no	yes
Form to contact a councillor	yes	no	no
Discussion forum	no	no	yes
What issues are discussed?	NA	NA	9 forums: general, youth, clubs, business, car sharing and transport, geneology, community safety, MH neighbourhood watch, South L'shire Voluntary Forum
Are the discussions archived?	NA	NA	yes
Do councillors and officers participate?	NA	NA	yes, e-govt officer
Can citizens suggest a new topic	NA	NA	yes
Are there links to other discussion groups	NA	NA	yes

Are there any guidelines about how to comment on an issue online or otherwise?	info on complaint procedures, also frequently mentioning various channels	no	yes, complaints procedure as well as within planning section
Is there any list of current consultations?	no	no	yes, current vote
Is there any list of previous consultations and their results?	no	yes	yes, budget consultation
Methodology of the consultation	NA		yes
What did people say?	NA		yes
What did council do?	NA		yes
Is there any invitation to be subscribed for a mailing list for consultation?	no	no	no
Is there any information about offline consultation of the council?	yes (through press release)	yes, more infor through press releases	yes, through press releases, also advertising budget consultaion process
Is there any information (date, place, agenda) about the forthcoming meetings such as:	yes	yes	
Council meetings	yes	yes	yes
Committee meetings	yes	yes	yes
Community forums	yes	yes	yes
Tenant forum	no	no	yes
User groups	no	no	no
Surgery hours	no	only MP	no
Is there any clear commitment about how the council will respond to the feedback and what should the participant expect from the council?	through customer care policy, also in planning	no	only complaint procedure

Is there any information on how to contact the council in other methods such as telephone, fax or by visiting the council, opening hours?	yes	yes	yes, except opening hours
Local democracy			
Is there any information about political control of the council?	no	not directly	no
Is there a list of councillors by name or ward?	yes	yes	yes
Can you find any of the following information for councillors?			
Date of joining	yes	no	yes
Party membership	yes	yes	yes
Committee membership	yes	yes	no
Activities outside the council, e.g. Membership of union/voluntary organisations	no	no	no
Can you find the contact details of councillors?			
Name	yes	yes	yes
Ward/constituency boundaries	yes	yes	yes
Telephone	yes	no	yes
Address	yes	yes	yes
Email	no	no	yes, (18 out of 37)
Surgery hours	no	yes (only 1 ward)	no
Through the council website by filling a form	yes	no	no

Is there any information about how the council works?				
Basic information about what is a councillor, MP, officer	no		no	no
Their service length, responsibilities, code of conduct	no		no	indirectly under democratic services
The role of executive and the scrutiny	no		no	indirectly under democratic services
Political management structure (committee, cabinet, mayoral system)	no		no	
Can you find information related to elections?	yes		yes	yes
Information about the elections in general	yes		yes	yes
Results of the last elections (by ward, political party, turnout)	yes		yes	no
Election timetable	no		yes	yes
FAQ about elections	no		no	yes
Candidates	yes (only names within results)		yes	no
Polling stations	no		yes	yes
Information on electronic voting or other innovative ways	yes		yes	yes
Apply to join the electoral register	yes		no	yes
Download an application form to join the electoral register to be sent by post	yes		yes	yes
Are there any email addresses of the council staff?	yes		yes	yes

Does the authority clearly state how the emails will be dealt?	through customer care	no	no
Can you download any of the following from the website?			
IEG Statements	yes	yes	yes
Best Value Plans	yes	yes	yes
Community Plan/Local Plan	yes	yes	yes
Annual reports of councillors	no	no	no
Budget briefings	yes	no	no
Press releases	yes	yes	yes
Constitution	yes	no	yes
Can you find information about Committees?			
Membership	yes	yes	no
Agendas	no (only upon request)	no	yes, only for planning
Reports/ Documents/Minutes	no	no	yes, only for planning
Meeting Calendar	yes	yes	yes
Usability/Accessibility			
Is the website up to date?			
Are there facilities to make navigation easier?	yes	yes	yes
Site map	yes	no	no
Search	no	no	yes
A - Z list	yes	yes	yes

Are there facilities to increase the accessibility of the site?				
Text only version	no		no	yes
Information on other languages	yes (very little in housing section)		no	no
Facilities for visual impairment	no		no	no

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