

# **“CITIZENS AS CUSTOMERS”?**

**E-GOVERNMENT**

**AND**

**ONLINE DEMOCRACY**

**IN NEW ZEALAND**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines emerging models of electronic government in New Zealand, in the context of growing international interest in the democratic possibilities of advanced information and communications technologies (ICTs). The thesis explores theoretical approaches to the study of the relationships between technology and politics, in particular regarding the possibilities advanced ICTs in enhancing the development of democratic participation. The thesis then explores the approaches to online citizen-government interaction taken by the e-government programmes of governments in New Zealand and internationally. The aim of this approach is to move towards a better understanding of the roles and limitations of technology in politics, by means of an evaluation of the extent to which governmental applications of ICT have thus far lived up to the hopes of the literature and governmental rhetoric regarding democratic political participation.

This investigation utilises the threefold typology of models of interaction (the 'managerial', 'consultative' and 'participatory' models) identified by Chadwick and May (2001), as a means of structuring the analysis. The focus of this analysis is on a detailed case study of New Zealand as an emerging e-government. In the study of New Zealand's emerging approaches to e-government, the thesis draws on a wide range of governmental policy statements, particularly from the New Zealand Government, and on the analysis of practical governmental ICT initiatives in New Zealand and internationally. The thesis concludes that a reliance on technology in bringing about democratic political change would appear unwise, particularly given the dominance of managerial models of online government. More research is required to establish the most effective means of encouraging democratic forms of online interaction.



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## **CHAPTER ONE**

# **INTRODUCTION: INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES AND POLITICS IN NEW ZEALAND**

### **I. INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE**

This thesis will examine, in both a theoretical and empirical sense, the issues surrounding current governmental uses of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in New Zealand. The thesis will examine the extent to which governmental ICT projects that approach cyberspace<sup>1</sup> as a means of enhancing democracy appear to support popular claims for the democratic potential of these technologies.

For the most part, those interested in the development of democracy through ICT have focused on the non-governmental areas of cyberspace. To the extent that government has been seen as having a positive role to play in cyberspace, the usual focal point of the discussion has been on local government-level applications, in particular the 'civic networks' developed quite early on by a number of towns and cities across Europe and the United States (see for example Brants et al. 1996, Hale et al. 1999). Discussion and research on the role of national level government in promoting political participation and democratic community online is considerably less common, and much more controversial. In fact, as discussed in the second chapter, many hope that ICT may contribute to the weakening of the power of the nation state, though there is little agreement about what should take its place.

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<sup>1</sup> By 'cyberspace', I mean the 'space' made possible by communication utilising a cluster of computer and communications technologies associated with the Internet, including e-mail, newsgroups, interactive cable television, conferencing and so on.

It is perhaps understandable that many discussions of democratic political participation online have avoided the topic of national government. As already suggested, many critics consider national governments, as they currently stand, to be part of the problem for online democracy, rather than the means of bringing it about. Central governments are commonly seen as a threat in cyberspace, the members of which have from its inception tended to view cyberspace as in a fundamental sense rightfully 'free' from external constraints. This is particularly true of the United States, where federal government attempts at the censorship of the Internet and the protection of copyright laws have aroused vigorous, often vitriolic responses from Internet enthusiasts. Furthermore, most national governments were noticeably ambivalent in their initial attitudes to the new technologies, and tended to be relatively slow to make much practical use of them or to develop policies for their use.

As information and communications technologies have developed, however, governments both local and central have begun to take a more active interest in the possibilities of these technologies for the political process and the operations of government. The development of the Internet in particular has seen a marked increase in discussion, both within and outside of government, of the potential of ICT for government and the role that government should take in the operations of these technologies. Most major governments are now beginning to actively talk about and make use of ICT as a tool of government. Many national governments now seem to be considering, to a certain degree at least, the idea that ICT could also be used as means of enhancing the democratic process in some way. If the result of this new interest is to be anything more than superficial, however, we must pay careful attention to the definitions of and approaches to technology, politics and democracy that appear to be adopted by our governments. One way that these definitions and approaches can be revealed is in the study of governmental policies and practice involving ICT and democracy. That is the method used in this thesis.

As a result of the new focus on technology and politics that has followed the development of computing and communications technologies in recent years, the role of government in cyberspace and the potential of ICT to improve the operations of government have come under increasing scrutiny. Many expect that government will become more democratic as a result of the influence of these technologies, providing broader, fairer access to information and government services, and potentially allowing greater direct citizen involvement in the political process through voting and political discussion mechanisms. As Bryan et al. (1998 p. 2) have suggested, “for many, computer-mediated communication holds the key to the enhancement of the democratic aspects of the political process and to the creation of opportunities for citizen participation in the local and national political spheres.” These hopes have indeed been behind many national and particularly local government ICT projects around the world since the 1970s, particularly the prominent civic networking movement, as well as a multitude of experiments by scholars and organisations aimed at using various forms of ICT to enhance democracy.

There has also been a growing appreciation among academics across a variety of disciplines of the need to better understand the influence of technology on modern social and political life. Yet despite the growth of interest, there remains a tendency for those studying technology to fail to look beyond the confines of their own discipline. While sociology, philosophy, psychology, feminist theory, management, history, cultural studies, economics, media studies, and political science have all developed discourses on certain aspects of the nature and roles of technological systems appropriate to each discipline, the understandings gained have tended to be limited in scope and scattered across the various fields (Bijker and Law 1992, pp. 4-5). As Willem Vanderburg (1988, p. 5) points out, “the division of labour currently found in the university makes it difficult to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the roles science and technology play in human life and society in general and the political sphere in particular.”

A result of this fragmentation is that until fairly recently there has been little movement towards the development of a framework for understanding the role of technology in

society (Bijker and Law 1992, pp. 4-7. See also Misa 1994 and Feenberg 1999, pp. vii-viii and chapter one). This is understandable, since a detailed understanding of the vast complexity of the modern world is beyond the scope of any single discipline; hence the need for specialisation. Unfortunately, the result in the case of ICT has been the development of competing discourses in the various fields that seem to take little notice of research in other areas, while supporters and opponents of various uses of the new technologies spend a great deal of time and effort talking past one another. While this thesis most obviously falls in the category of political science and theory, where possible it will adopt a multidisciplinary approach, taking account of a variety of different perspectives and making use of both theoretical and empirical research from a number of related fields, particularly the philosophy of technology, management, psychology, communications and feminist theory.

The technological environment on which what we know as cyberspace is based has only been present in its current form for a matter of a few years, and in many ways that environment, and the social structures cyberspace has allowed to develop, are still in constant flux. Despite this, analysts have been extremely quick to leap to conclusions about cyberspace, largely based on particular (often questionable or unsupported) assumptions about the role of technology in society, politics and the economy. Both supporters and opponents of various ICTs have too often been unwilling to suspend judgement until the nature of the socio-technical environment becomes more clear, or to take full account of research and analysis from outside of their own direct area of expertise. Too often, those writing on technology clearly “begin with a set of assumptions about cyberspace that often forecloses a more detailed and critical analysis of its defects and potential” (Wilhelm 2000, p. 14). In the case of discussion about the political applications of ICT, this has often been expressed in competing, exaggerated narratives of either democratic rebirth or *1984*-style surveillance and inequality. Yet in a field where the technology moves as quickly as it does where ICTs are concerned, it seems unwise to concentrate solely on speculation about as yet unrealised developments. Instead, it seems more valuable to focus on current trends in governmental technological practice, in an attempt to better understand our existing relationships with our technologies.

The aim of this study is to develop a more theoretically sophisticated understanding of the types of information and political participation in government available through ICT in New Zealand, and the theoretical approaches under which governmental information and opportunities for political participation are made available. There are many questions that arise from this study. What have been the approaches of New Zealand governments to the provision of governmental information and government processes online? What are the barriers to public access to online government, and how does government intend them to be overcome? To what extent can the political information and discussion available in cyberspace be considered to be hindering and/or promoting an open, vibrant democracy in New Zealand? How do New Zealand governmental ICT projects in this area relate to international governmental initiatives? How do governmental approaches to online political participation relate to the growing academic and popular literature of online democracy? These questions will be explored in the course of the thesis.

## **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES**

As Hale et al. (1999, p. 108) have noted, there is always the danger, when analysing a phenomenon as rapidly evolving as ICT use, of attempting to examine a moving target. There is always the potential that any research in this area could be quickly rendered redundant by further technical innovations. However, while the technologies used may change, and thus the particular applications, it is the governmental approaches to the use of these technologies that is of particular interest, rather than the technologies themselves. Thus, while evidence regarding specific applications of a given technology may become fairly quickly outdated, the insights gained from an analysis of governmental approaches to online communication and democracy are likely to be more lasting.

In this thesis I am adopting the case study approach used successfully in the study of civic networks and other governmental ICT projects (see for example Abramson et al. 1988, Tsagarousianou et al. 1998, Coleman et al. 1999, Hague and Loader 1999), applied

to the case of New Zealand, though I will extend this model to the consideration of broader social and public aspects of ICT use. The thesis will place the New Zealand experience within the context of trends in international governmental ICT initiatives. For the most part, this aspect of the thesis will be limited to the study of advanced, Western nations, in large part due to the limited availability of resources and the extraordinarily complex nature of the issues facing developing nations. However, where possible the experience of non-Western and developing nations will be referred to.

Discussions of governmental models of online government within smaller Western nations have been rare, as have studies that combine local and central governmental analysis in a systematic manner. Discussion of New Zealand ICT-based governmental initiatives is almost non-existent (though see Boyle 2000). Yet, New Zealand is particularly interesting as a case study of an emerging governmental approach to online government, and is valuable in illustrating questions regarding the development of governmental approaches. Efforts to enhance democratic politics through the application of ICT have been underway for some years around the world, with varying degrees of success. New Zealand is therefore in many ways in an ideal position to learn from the experiences of these past and present international projects. Indeed, there is evidence that this has been the case.

The New Zealand Government has since 1999 in particular begun to develop an 'e-government' programme, including the establishment of an 'E-Government Unit' within the State Services Commission, and has released a number of policy documents detailing the envisaged development of e-government. Early e-government documents in particular were clearly influenced by overseas initiatives, taking care to place New Zealand's programme within the context of similar international programmes<sup>2</sup>. The present Director

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, the 1999 Ministerial Briefing statement on e-government (CEGIMT 1999, s. 4, and see also s. 5, s. 7) stated that: "alongside the spectacular rise of e-commerce, around the world we are witnessing the emergence of a related phenomenon that is being called 'information age government' or e-government. Nearly all developed countries now regard developing e-government as a key strategy for ensuring their success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and are rapidly implementing major initiatives in this area".

of the E-Government Unit of the State Services Commission conducted an analysis of a number of international e-government projects as part of a Masters of Business Administration (see Boyle 2000), and governmental presentations and documents have repeatedly made explicit reference to overseas initiatives (see for example Bruce 2001). However, while New Zealand governmental ICT projects have clearly been influenced by international initiatives, as will be seen in later chapters the New Zealand Government in particular has begun to adopt a highly active, potentially innovative approach to online government<sup>3</sup>.

As the New Zealand Government has noted, New Zealand has a number of characteristics which electronic government “will need to reflect and take advantage of” (SSC 2001b, p. 30). These include the fact that New Zealand is a “small country geographically”, with “small geographically dispersed population within New Zealand and worldwide of 4 million”, who are “enthusiastic adopters of new technology” and “significant users of EFTPOS technology” (SSC 2001c, p. 30). Thus, “communication links and capacity should not be major barriers”, and “it is expected that New Zealanders will make use of Internet-based services earlier than most” (SSC 2001c, p. 30). The evidence suggests that New Zealanders have indeed been quick to take up use of the Internet: by 2000 42% of New Zealand households had access to a computer, with 50% of New Zealanders reporting they had access to the Internet at home or at work (Information Technology Policy Group 2001, sections 5.1 and 5.2). The Government believes that these features of New Zealand society will make it “easier and less expensive to communicate with and train the target market. With appropriate funding, a sound management structure and political will, New Zealand can get there faster than many of the major countries” (SSC 2001c, p. 30).

In examining current political uses of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in New Zealand, this thesis will involve both theoretical and

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<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Minister for Information Technology, Paul Swain, indicated the influence of international initiatives when he stated that while “the New Zealand public sector has some leading edge examples of e-government ... in more general terms New Zealand lags behind similar countries overseas. It is our intention to catch up fast.” (Swain 2000, p. 4).



empirical research. At the empirical level, the following sources of information will be drawn upon:

- New Zealand governmental web sites (including institutions both at the local and central level);
- New Zealand governmental and policy documents and press releases; and
- Supplementary analysis of international governmental ICT projects and documentation.

Clearly, this degree of primary research requires an adequate theoretical framework on which to structure the analysis and enable strong conclusions to be drawn. As noted above, the literature on governmental applications of ICT use is only beginning to be established, but there is still much useful material. This thesis makes extensive, critical use of this literature, in particular a number of case studies of international governmental ICT projects, and also draws on a wide range of other theoretical traditions outside of political science itself. In the analysis of New Zealand's e-government initiatives, the thesis will where appropriate adopt a critical perspective, exploring and evaluating not only the parallels and divergences between New Zealand and international governmental approaches, but also the strength of arguments regarding the nature and potential of the democratic applications of technology.

A number of studies have developed general typologies of governmental approaches to online democracy, including those by Abramson (1988 pp. 18-31), Hacker 1996, Bryan et al. (1998 pp. 6-8), Hague and Loader (1999, p. 13) and Taylor and Burt 1999. The models of online government that these authors have developed have exhibited a number of similarities, and are all valuable. In exploring the approach of New Zealand governments to online democracy, this thesis has been influenced by these models. In particular, the typology developed by Chadwick and May (2001), which was based on the primary analysis of the American, British and European Union ICT programmes, has proved a particularly useful.

Chadwick and May's typology was generated by asking six basic questions of governmental ICT projects:

- What role is played by government?
- Who are the dominant actors and interests?
- What is the dominant perspective on the flow of information?
- What are the principle mechanisms for interaction between government and citizens?
- What attention is paid to the ability of citizens to interact electronically?
- What is the defining logic, or *raison d'être* of each model? (Chadwick and May 2001, p. 12)

The answers to these questions that any particular governmental ICT project generates will clearly have considerable implications for form that online democracy takes. It is therefore important that this thesis ask these questions, in combination with those discussed earlier, as part of the analysis of New Zealand governmental ICT projects.

Based on their analysis, Chadwick and May (2001, pp. 12-16) generated a three-part typology, consisting of the 'managerial', 'consultative' and 'participatory' models of governmental approaches to online interaction between citizens and governments. As they note, each model:

... is an ideal type in the Weberian sense – a heuristic tool for identifying and classifying the main features of a set of phenomena, with a view to rendering complex processes more intelligible and comparable in a way that aids further empirical research. (Chadwick and May 2001, p. 2)

Thus, the models themselves do not always correspond exactly to reality; while in any given project one model is likely to be dominant, projects may incorporate elements of each (Chadwick and May 2001, p. 2).

Chadwick and May's models of interaction, which will be discussed in detail in chapters three, four and five, have been valuable in developing a theoretical framework for the analysis of New Zealand governmental ICT projects. It is important to note, however, where this thesis differs from Chadwick and May's study. Firstly, there is a difference in terminology between this thesis and Chadwick and May's study. In this thesis, Chadwick and May's 'participatory' model has been renamed the 'deliberative' model. While public participation is indeed key to the 'participatory' model, it is also a prominent feature of

the 'consultative' model. The difference between the two models is thus ultimately based on a distinction between the *forms* of public participation that they encourage, rather than the fact of participation itself. Given the 'participatory' model's focus on political discussion, the 'deliberative' label is more useful in distinguishing it from the second, consultative model of online interaction.

More importantly, Chadwick and May's study was for the most part a limited comparative analysis of various governmental ICT projects within the United States, Britain and the European Union. In contrast, this thesis focuses primarily on experiences within a single nation, allowing a more thorough and detailed investigation. Moreover, rather than concentrate on comparison between nations, this thesis aims to evaluate New Zealand governmental approaches within the context of broader trends in both theoretical approaches to technology in politics, and the international governmental use of ICT. As such, this thesis draws on a considerably wider range of theoretical literature than Chadwick and May's study.

### **III. STRUCTURE**

Chapter Two of this thesis explores major theoretical approaches to the study of the relationships between technology and society, with a focus on the case of advanced ICTs. The chapter focuses on the prevalence of determinism in both optimistic and pessimistic views of technology, and on emerging 'techno-structural' responses to this determinism. The chapter then examines popular approaches, both supportive and critical, regarding the potential of ICT in enhancing democratic politics, and the influence of positive portrayals of the potential of ICT in political on governmental ICT projects.

Chapter Three discusses emerging trends in the governmental provision of online information and services, both in New Zealand and internationally. The chapter then explores the dominant 'managerial' model of online government, and the extent to which it explains the approach to online government taken in New Zealand. The chapter then

discusses the role and limitations of information in modern politics, particularly in terms of the distinction between knowledge and information.

Chapter Four discusses the influence of participatory theories of democracy on the provision of access to online government and the use of consultative mechanisms in governmental ICT projects in New Zealand and internationally. The chapter then analyses the 'consultative' model of online political participation as it applies to the experience of governmental projects. The chapter then discusses difficulties in achieving equal access to online government, and the likely implications of the 'consultative' model of citizen-government online interaction for forms of political organisation and participation.

Chapter Five discusses New Zealand and international governmental approaches to the enabling of online public political discussion on political issues. The chapter analyses the extent to which governments have adopted contrasting 'consultative' and 'deliberative' models of online political discussion, particularly in the context of the governmental focus on accountability, legitimacy and services in participatory initiatives. Finally, the chapter evaluates the potential of online political debate in enhancing democratic participation, analysing the limits and potentials of the technologies in the light of the experience of government initiatives.

Chapter Six concludes the thesis with a discussion of the implications of the analysis of governmental ICT projects for hopes regarding the potential of technology in democratic participation. The chapter finishes with a discussion of the implications of this thesis for further research directions, highlighting questions that have arisen regarding online forms of democratic political participation.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

# **DEMOCRACY AND THE DISCOURSE ON TECHNOLOGY: IMPLICATIONS AND INFLUENCES IN GOVERNMENTAL ICT PROJECTS**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The extraordinary rise of the new information and communications technologies (ICTs) in recent years has come at a time of increased interest among political scientists and governments in the nature and future of democracy. This may or may not be a coincidence; certainly, there are a number of reasons for those interested in politics to pay more attention to matters of democratic participation, chief among them being the apparent rise in public apathy towards political matters represented by the rapid decline in voter turnout rates in almost all Western nations. For several decades now, there has been a great deal written on the subject of participation in democratic systems, with the focus being on explanations for the loss of interest in politics and calls for greater public involvement. Of course, explanations for the decline in public involvement in the political system, and claims about the particular types of participation that need to be promoted, vary a great deal. Nonetheless, the general consensus among political theorists across the political spectrum interested in matters of democratic governance has been that we must do something to reconnect the citizens of our democracies to the political process in a meaningful way. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that with the breathtaking speed of the development of computer and communications technologies following World War Two, many political scientists, politicians and commentators have become interested in the possibilities that these technologies might provide for democratic politics.

Discussions of the democratic potential of ICT have however, in their focus on the supposedly inherently democratic nature of the technologies, tended to oversimplify the meaning of democracy and the role of technology in society. There is much talk from politicians of 'democracy' somehow being enhanced by means of these developing technologies. For instance, the New Zealand Minister for State Services, Trevor Mallard, claims that the Government's "vision is to use information and communications technologies to provide better government services and information electronically, and to build a closer relationship between government and citizens", and that 'e-government' "is an important part of the future of democracy" (Mallard 2000d, p. 1). Yet there are many possible ways that ICT could be used to enhance democracy, depending on the technologies used and the particular features of democratic politics that are focused on. Unless we are clear about what democracy means, and what we hope to achieve through the application of ICT, the outcomes are likely to be disappointing. Moreover, as we will see in later chapters, while governments may contribute to the view of ICT as a democratic medium, the realities of governmental applications of ICT tell us important things about the governmental view of the meaning and role of 'democracy' in politics.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, the aim of this thesis is to examine the extent to which current emerging governmental approaches to online politics, with a focus on the case of New Zealand, look likely to fulfil these hopes for democracy finding its place in cyberspace. However, before proceeding to the analysis of New Zealand's experience of technology and politics, it is important to put this discussion into the broader context of Western attitudes to technology in general and ICT in particular. As suggested above, the discourse on the political applications of ICT has particular characteristics and biases, which have influenced the practical political applications to which ICT has been put. Any attempt to make sense of cyberspace therefore clearly needs to place the discussion of those political applications in the broader context of Western attitudes to technology and politics. That is the goal of this chapter.

This chapter's discussion of the discourses on technology and politics is divided into two parts. The first part examines trends in Western analysis of technology in general, as well

as that directly focused on ICT. In particular, I discuss determinism in both optimistic and pessimistic analyses of technology, and recent attempts to develop and encourage debate on technological issues that avoids this determinism in favour of a more pragmatic, socially grounded understanding. Part two focuses more directly on the relationships between ICT and politics, particularly with regard to specific types of claims that have been made about the likely impacts of these technologies on democratic politics.

## **II. TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM IN THE ICT DISCOURSE: UTOPIANISM, DYSTOPIANISM AND TECHNO-STRUCTURALISM**

Each year, massive amounts of text are written commenting on different aspects of the new computer technologies' relationships with society, economy and, to a lesser extent, politics. Our fascination with our new technologies is obvious, and understandable. The development in recent years of information and communication technologies in ever faster and smaller forms, with apparently ever-widening capacities and applications, has been breathtaking. It should therefore come as no surprise that the legions of journalists, researchers, consultants and businesspeople involved in commentating on these developments should be drawn towards making excited claims about the impacts, positive or negative, these advances will have on all aspects of our experience. The vast majority of the literature is overwhelmingly in favour of the 'revolution' currently underway, sprinkled with the latest buzzwords and focused on descriptions of some aspect of life in the future that will be improved through particular technological advances. Less commonly, some hardened critics of modern life focus largely on the perceived dangers and potentially destructive impacts of technology, often offering dark visions of a harsh, divided, alienated, and/or superficial society of the future.

These opposed perspectives are part of a long tradition of contrasting utopian and dystopian visions of technological change present in Western thought, attitudes that unfortunately often lead to deterministic arguments and incomplete, one-sided analysis. These visions are based on often unfounded, exaggerated, or unspoken assumptions about

the role of technology in society, the influence of government, and the inevitability of unfettered technological progress. As a result, the space for a balanced critical discussion of ICTs' nature, roles, and development, one based on empirical research and a detailed analytical framework, has often been limited. A great deal of the literature on cyberspace displays an excessive concentration on possible futures, focusing on the extraordinary possibilities or dangerous pitfalls that developing ICTs may create. Unfortunately, in doing so it deflects attention from the many social and political structures and processes that have shaped, and will continue to shape, these technologies' development, use, and impacts. Scholars in recent years have however begun to call for a more complex, careful understanding of technological issues, pointing particularly to the importance of these social and political influences on technological change.

This part of the chapter will briefly examine these attitudes towards technological development as they apply to the present discourse on governmental applications of ICT in politics, and the implications this has for the design and development of projects attempting to make use of these technologies.

## **1. Technological Utopianism**

The effects of technology on society first began to be consistently and popularly viewed as important in the wake of the increasing industrialisation of Western society from around the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. As technology became more developed, complex and powerful during the Modern period of European history, it began to assume more importance in the eyes of many in Western societies, including prominent intellectual figures as diverse as Bacon, Marx and Descartes (Pippin 1994). The extraordinary scientific and technical innovations leading to what later became known as the Industrial Revolution, combined with the concurrent growth of trade and the re-evaluation of the social importance of the economic sphere, meant that technical practice for the first time began to be taken seriously as an instrument of progress and as an important influence on society (Feenberg 1999, pp. 69-73). Indeed, from the Industrial Revolution until recently



science and technology have occupied privileged positions in most secular Western thought. This bias developed into a 'progressivist' or 'futurist'<sup>4</sup> approach to technology and society, one that treats new technologies as essentially good, in that scientific and technological innovation are considered to be the methods by which humanity will be improved<sup>5</sup>.

This somewhat romantic idea of 'Progress' in social and political life being achieved through scientific and technological innovation has long been attractive to Western minds, and has frequently served to remove any critical effective examination of science or technology from the popular agenda (Winner 1995, 1996). For much of the last few centuries continued technological innovation has been popular across most segments of Western society, as Marxists and liberals alike have looked approvingly on the rapid development of modern technology as a means to political and social improvement. As Rob Kling notes, it remains common for commentators on technological issues to simply "assume that social progress will come primarily through technological progress" (Kling 1996a, p. 23). The abiding strength of this attitude to technological development is nowhere more evident than in the furore surrounding the rise of personal computers and massively expanding use of communications technology.

The computerisation movement calls for the application of ICT to improve all walks of life, including business and organisational management, education, government and politics, and home life<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, ICT seems to appeal to almost everyone, from radical communitarian democrats to free-market libertarians, from small local community groups

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'futurist' can be used in this context to refer to a specific, radical movement in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century arts, led by the Italian poet Filippo Marinetti and popularised through a series of manifestos and exhibitions. Here, however, I am using it to refer more broadly to a general belief in social progress through technological advance. See Wilhelm (2000, pp. 2-5) for a brief discussion of the Futurist movement as it relates to similar currently popular attitudes to technology, which he describes as 'neofuturist'.

<sup>5</sup> See Kling (1994, and 1996 a and b). See Sclove and Scheuer (1996, pp. 607-10) for a discussion of early romantic attitudes towards the developing interstate highway network in America. Nye (1997) gives a number of examples of early twentieth century positivist attitudes towards early forms of ICT such as the telephone, as well as more modern claims.

<sup>6</sup> See Barney (2000) and Iacono and Kling (1996). Weiland (1996) provides a particularly rose-tinted view of the multitudinous potential applications of ICT, and see also Marien (1989) for an attempt at a brief, balanced overview of the sometimes conflicting effects of ICT across a wide range of social, political, and economic issues.

to nation states and corporations. Some optimistic feminists and activists for disadvantaged or oppressed groups (for example Spender 1995, Rash 1997, Youngs 1999) have suggested that, provided that equal access is achieved (the assumption being that it eventually will), ICT may provide the tools for vastly increased self-awareness, democratic organisation, and positive action. Others (building especially on Haraway and Balsamo; see Hawthorne 1999 and Kirkup 2001) have suggested that the manipulation of identity made possible by the Internet may allow gender and other characteristics become a tools for empowerment rather than oppression. Techno-libertarians view the Internet as a vital realm of opposition to governmental power: a pure, uncorrupted site of free speech, commerce and association (Barney 2000). Finally, more moderate enthusiasts merely believe that the application of advanced ICT to as many areas of life as possible will improve the efficiency of operations of those systems. Yet regardless of the specific degree of optimism, or the particular ends that are to be served, the dominant view of ICT in the West has clearly been part of an ongoing tradition of optimistic, bordering on utopian, views of the role of technology as an instrument of social progress.

The proliferation of computing technology, and also the growth of the Internet and email in the early to mid 1990s, created a wave of enthusiasm for ICT across most areas of modern society. ICT from its early manifestations has been viewed with excitement from most quarters of the media and to a lesser extent academia. The commercial media, in particular, quickly embraced ICT and computing in general, featuring repeated stories on and interviews with leaders in the field, and frequent profiles of the latest 'revolutionary' technologies. As early as 1982, *Time* magazine selected the personal computer as its 'Man of the Year', displaying enthusiasm that remains strong in most sections of the media, despite a number of controversies in recent years involving copyright infringements and pornography in particular. A number of popular studies of the new ICTs were quickly released, and continue to be released, usually following a line of argument that points to technological change and development as the solution to society's

ills, from inequality and exclusion, to overwork and a lack of leisure time, to ignorance and poor education<sup>7</sup>.

There has been much talk among futurists of revolutionary phenomena such as a so-called 'Third Wave' (to use Toffler's still popular term) of development, which will apparently bring increased opportunity and equality, breaking up the monopoly of power held by big business and government (Segal 1994, Berdayes and Berdayes 1998, Barney 2000; see also Toffler 1980). Indeed, some have pointed to the perceived difficulties in retaining corporate control in cyberspace as pointing towards a new, more democratic economy and society. Negroponte (1995, p. 165) has even argued that the new technologies will lead to the "evaporation of the nation-state", suggesting along with other futurists the development of societies characterised by 'demassification', decentralisation, 'denationalisation', 'disintermediation' and 'disaggregation' (see also Toffler 1980 for arguments on a similarly grand scale).

Equally as often, however, these claims are not made explicitly. Instead, the vision of technology as a social panacea is promoted simply through the constant favourable attention given to new technologies in the media and elsewhere (Kling 1996a). Catch-phrases and metaphors such as 'global village', 'smart home', 'virtual reality', 'wired school', 'paperless office' and 'information or knowledge age / society / economy / superhighway' quickly became popularised, amongst a range of similarly exciting phrases that failed to catch on<sup>8</sup>. The conflation of these terms, as they are used in a wide range of contexts and formulations, has done little to clarify the issues. As Langdon Winner has suggested, much of the initial enthusiasm for these technologies may well have been the result of active campaigns by those with an interest in promoting computer

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<sup>7</sup> Some of the better-known prophets of the coming 'communications revolution' include Toffler (1980), Naisbitt (1982), Williams (1982), Forester (1987), Negroponte (1995), Rheingold (1995), and Dertouzos (1997). Segal (1994) and Brown and Duguid (2000) give good overviews of the arguments of these populist authors, focusing particularly on Toffler and Naisbitt.

<sup>8</sup> See in particular Kling (1996b, pp. 47-8), and also Segal (1994) and Brown and Duguid (2000, chapter 1). Other futurist catch-phrases, for the most part the inventions of Toffler, that failed to quite catch the zeitgeist include 'prosumer', 'ad-hocracy', 'practopia', and 'cognitariat'.

technology: scientists, engineers, marketers, businesspeople and corporate advisors (Winner 1989, see also Iacono and Kling 1996). If so, they were remarkably effective, though there is no doubt that large numbers of people find the rapid pace of ICT development appealing in its own right; they are in many ways 'seductive technologies' (Kling 1996a; see also Rawlins 1996, Heim 1999). Rob Kling notes that computing is:

... the centrepiece of seductive visions and dreams. The seduction comes from the hope that vast possibilities for information handling and 'enhanced intelligence' can be readily accessible at relatively low cost and little effort. (1996a, p. 22)

As critics have pointed out, by consistently focusing on technology in isolation as an instrument of positive social change, much writing on technology ignores important points about both the potential side-effects or negative impacts of new technologies and the social background to the development and application of those technologies. Indeed, as we will see in the next section, the wide-eyed optimism of much writing on technology has inspired powerful, sometimes vitriolic responses from those concerned for the negative consequences of continued technological development.

## **2. Technological Dystopianism**

Though mainstream society has for the most part paid little heed, there has of course always been a counter-discourse on technological issues. From the Ancient Greeks onwards there have been those in Western thought and society who opposed the evolution and use of the technical arts as detrimental to our welfare and role as political citizens. Isolated resistance to new technologies, expressed in the thought of a number of social critics and in a variety of social movements of which the Luddites were the most prominent, grew in the wake of increasing speed of technological innovation. In the Twentieth Century in particular, the strong faith of many in Western Society in the desirability of unfettered scientific and technological advance was shaken by a number of disastrous and potentially disastrous events and developments. The two World Wars, the invention and use of nuclear and chemical weapons, the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl nuclear disasters, the growth of genetic engineering techniques, and growing evidence of

excessive environmental damage, among a long list of other concerns, have all seriously dented the confidence of many in the benign nature of technological progress (Marx 1994, Rawlins 1996, Feenberg 1999).

As the sometimes negative consequences of advanced technology became clear, criticisms of modern technical systems and technological society as a whole became more common, sophisticated and systematic. These developing critiques were spearheaded in academia by broadly rejectionist critics such as Mumford, Horkheimer and Adorno, Heidegger, Marcuse, and Ellul and in the wider public by the environmental, feminist, peace and counterculture movements of the 1960s and 70s<sup>9</sup>. These critics have however been no more immune to making grand, sweeping statements with regard to technology than those they are attempting to respond to. Developing Heidegger's arguments, critics have argued that technology, since it is by its nature focused on the control and manipulation of the environment to serve human ends, is essentially biased towards the promotion of attitudes of domination<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, the tools we use shape our way of life and therefore our goals themselves; technique and technology increasingly become all-pervasive, a process described by James Beniger (1986) as the 'control revolution'. To borrow McLuhan's (1964, p. 6) evocative phrase, humans have become merely the "sex organs of the machine world."

Critics have questioned the enthusiastic adoption of cyberspace by some feminists, post-modernists and many political activists as a tool for advancing the causes of the oppressed and of radically altering conceptions of identity and the body. These critics have raised important concerns about power relationships in cyberspace and the value of

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<sup>9</sup> A large number of authors have written powerful critiques of various aspects of technological systems in recent times. A complete list is impossible here, but some of the more prominent works include Marcuse (1964), Ellul (1964, 1990), Heidegger (1977), Winner (1977, 1986), Schiller (1984), Borgmann (1984), Postman (1985, 1992), Beniger (1986), Roszak (1986), Leiss (1990) and Bogard (1996).

<sup>10</sup> Coyne (1995, chapter 4), Pippin (1994) and Feenberg (1999, pp. 1-17 and chapter 8) especially, all give valuable summaries of the dystopian perspective on technology as an objectifying way of thinking, particularly as embodied by Heidegger.

this idolisation of technology, as well as concerns about the ability of disadvantaged groups to access the new technologies (for example Klein 1999, Hawthorne 1999). Feminist scholars such as Cockburn, drawing on the sociology of science that developed following Kuhn's 1970 landmark *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, have in the last twenty years also pointed to science and technology as being inherently tied to relations of male domination, in this case in the form of patriarchal knowledge expressed in technology that is "fundamentally based on the masculine projects of reason and objectivity" (Wajcman 1991).

In many of these schools of thought, the basic, essential dichotomies that seem to characterise Western scientific rationality, such as reason over emotion, mind over body, masculine over feminine, culture and technology over nature, and objectivity over subjectivity, are naturally entrenched in the technological objects that science has spawned<sup>11</sup>. As technical systems extend further across all areas of the modern world, these relations of domination are propagated and embedded ever more comprehensively in human societies. For these critics, the only viable response to the domination of technology, to the extent that one is possible, is therefore a fundamental reversal of our attitudes towards technology and our reliance on technical means<sup>12</sup>. At the very least, most critics argue that technology as we know it must be restricted to more appropriate

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<sup>11</sup> See for example Wajcman (1991) on the feminist perspective.

<sup>12</sup> This is a particularly difficult point to generalise on, since the particular arguments about the nature of this reversal vary considerably among critical theorists. There are many different theoretical perspectives on the best response to the domination of science and technology. Among them, there are those who argue for a return to a basically pre-modern (and largely pre-rational in the Kantian sense at least) connection with the 'natural', such as Horkheimer and Adorno, many members of the ecofeminist movement, and perhaps Marcuse and Heidegger. There are those who hope for the development of a new, alternative technics that is not based on ideologies of domination, such as Feenberg and members of the feminist movement such as Griffin and Keller, as well as possibly Foucault, Marcuse and Heidegger. Some critics hope more modestly to limit the use of technology to its 'appropriate' realms of beneficial use, such as Habermas and Dewey.

The problem is compounded, since many critics of modern technology are sometimes unclear as to exactly what sort of response to modern systems of technical domination would be desirable, particularly Foucault but also including Heidegger and Marcuse, among others. To the extent that a broad generalisation of these diverse perspectives is possible (and even desirable), it is possible to say that all share a concern for what they see as the dominating, destructive and repressive nature of modern technical systems and structures, and believe that a significant reconsideration of the role of technology in society is required to free us (and nature) from that enslavement. The distinctions between these critics will be explored below in the discussion of determinism. See Wajcman (1991), Pippin (1994) and Feenberg (1999) for three excellent discussions of recent critical theories of technology.

domains, and must be subject to more stringent controls on its design, development and application<sup>13</sup>.

With the rapid development of ICT in the later part of last century came a number of gloomy predictions of the impacts of these technologies on social interaction and the distribution of political and economic power. Numerous books were released arguing against the tide of popular and media infatuation with the new technologies, bearing titles along the lines of *Digital Delirium*, *Under Technology's Thumb*, *The Future does not Compute*, and *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*<sup>14</sup>. Many of the more pessimistic of these critics have portrayed future societies based in computer technology as being relentlessly harsh. They point to surveillance technologies, rising inequality, fragmenting social, political and work patterns, and increasing globalisation and commercialisation as inevitable consequences of our growing fascination with ICT<sup>15</sup>. Others, such as Paul Virilio (1997), argue that the new technologies threaten to eliminate place and time, replacing unique localised cultures with a globalised world of isolated 'terminal citizens'. To the extent that these critics acknowledge the enjoyment and people gain from communicating and playing through computers, these activities are usually seen as superficial, transitory diversions, and a poor substitute for genuine personal face-to-face interaction<sup>16</sup>. Whatever the strengths of these arguments, and these are frequently powerful criticisms that prompt a serious reconsideration of our relationship with

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<sup>13</sup> For participatory democratic theories of technological design, drawing particularly on Dewey and Marcuse, that call for a reconsideration of the ends of technology while nevertheless avoiding the outright technological rejectionism of many critics, see for example Sclove (1995) and Feenberg (1999). These theorists will be discussed in the following section.

<sup>14</sup> Respectively Leiss (1990), Postman (1992), Talbott (1995), Kroker and Kroker (1997).

<sup>15</sup> There are many examples of this sort of analysis, which focus almost entirely on the negative or dangerous uses of ICT. See for example Roszak (1986), Borgmann (1992), Clarke (1994), Bogard (1996), Friedland (1996), Winner (1996), Robins and Webster (1999), among many others.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Borgmann (1992, pp. 102-8), Winner (1996, pp. 68-70) and Robbins and Webster (1999, pp. 243-7). As Cerulo (1997, and see Cerulo and Ruane 1998, and Jordan 1999) argues, sociology and communications studies often implicitly rank the quality of personal interaction based on a direct/mediated dichotomy, one which draws on a long line of sociological thought led by the likes of Durkheim and Simmel. In this dichotomy, which contrasts personal, face-to-face communication with mediated, distanced, apparently 'superficial' communication, modernity is the agent driving a shift to mediated interaction. Questions are however beginning to be raised about this tendency to treat mediated communication as somehow naturally less valuable or genuine than face-to-face communication, particularly given the rise of the Internet and growing evidence of the bonding, communicative functions of many forms of mediated communication, including television (see for example Ray 1999, Dibbel 1996). This point will be revisited later in this thesis.

technology, the effectiveness of the dystopian view in facilitating public debate on technological issues is limited by its tendency towards determinism, a weakness it shares with the futurist approach.

Technological utopians and dystopians write in genres shaped by sets of conventions or formulas that influence what is written, and limit what issues can and cannot be effectively covered<sup>17</sup>. These conventions can limit the argument to a simplistic position either for or against technology, without qualifications, hence the sharp contrast between supporters and critics of technology. To the extent that technological optimists consider the objections of their critics, they generally fail to seriously examine their arguments, instead simply listing the most common criticisms for the sake of an appearance of balance<sup>18</sup>. And while critics of technology are certainly right to question the blind optimism of much writing on technology, in drawing together a sweeping, comprehensive picture of a dark technological future, their response often fails to consider any virtues of the new technologies or the conditions under which they might not have the negative consequences they describe. The result on both sides is too often a passionate but unbalanced and exaggerated discourse.

### **3. Determinism in Theoretical Approaches to Technology**

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that the entire literature, either in the media or especially in academia, is divided sharply along technologically utopian and dystopian lines. In fact, the development in recent years of what I am calling (following Tehranian) the techno-structuralist perspective on technology has focused criticism on the hype and determinism of the utopians and dystopians. I will examine the techno-structuralist

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<sup>17</sup> Rob Kling (1994, 1996b) has examined the role of these conventions in shaping the historical development of the discourse on technology. Tehranian (1990, chapter 1), Mansell and Silverstone (1996), Sawhney (1996), Berdayes and Berdayes (1998), Nardi and O'Day (1999), Heim (1999) have all also commented on the common characteristics of this sort of writing on technology.

<sup>18</sup> Tehranian (1990, chapter 1). Marien (1989) is a good example of this tendency to simply list so-called 'positive' and 'negative' outcomes of the application of ICT, without a discussion of the circumstances and uncertainties involved.



perspective below, but first it is important to discuss the determinism that has plagued both utopian and dystopian approaches to technology.

This division is in many ways the result of an inclination towards deterministic positions, which weakens much writing on science and technology and has frequently dominated the discourse. Both supporters and critics of new technologies have in common a tendency to focus on technologically created futures and to ignore or downplay the importance of social and political factors in the analysis of technological issues (Kaufman-Osborn 1997, chapter 1, Hague and Loader 1999). In other words, there remains a tendency among many writers to consider the technologies in question as independent, autonomous influences on human social systems. To give just one, particularly explicit example, Michael Marien (1989, p. 42) states that “the IT story is unfolding, and there is little or nothing that can control or stop any aspect of the global industry.” Marien then provides a long list of various ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ effects that ICT is likely to bring about, across an enormously wide range of social, political and economic arenas. This is a common approach; we see in the literature many claims and predictions that a given technology will itself ‘cause’ or ‘lead to’ or ‘bring about’ certain effects, usually designated either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depending on the inclinations of each author, without any real consideration of the circumstances in which these effects might be moderated, weakened or avoided entirely.

The problem with this approach is that these deterministic arguments encourage complacency and/or apathy towards technological issues, leading to inaction and a dearth of serious public debate on technological issues (Winston 2001, pp. 161-7, Kaufman-Osborn 1997, pp. 30-1). Whatever the strength of any particular position, whether the view is utopian or anti-utopian, the argument is in essence usually much the same; that technology is no longer under social or political control, and that the future is largely predetermined, based only on the physical limits to technological progress (Nardi and O’Day 1999). If we adopt this perspective, there is little incentive to seriously consider the ends that are being promoted by technology, or act to influence the path of technological development and use. Instead, we can only sit back and wait for the

inevitable rewards that technological progress will bring, or alternatively attempt to avoid contact with harmful technologies ourselves and encourage others to do so (Winston 2001, p. 165). Neither of these alternatives is a practical response to our present situation, and is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of technology's roles and impacts in society.

Governments and other political organisations frequently claim their activities in cyberspace are aimed at enhancing democracy, a claim that goes unchallenged as long as we subscribe to the naïve belief that cyberspace itself is somehow inherently democratic in its operations<sup>19</sup>. Computerisation enthusiasts of all colours often reject or ignore the possibility that the computer revolution they see as both inevitable and desirable may not be to the taste of all; we all must adapt to the changes or face inevitable 'future shock'. The only option is therefore to adapt to the demands of new technologies. Moreover, in their enthusiastic, one-sided focus on the qualities of the new technologies themselves, they fail to note the point that the adoption of the particular possibilities these technologies may create is not a given. In addition, they ignore the many potential pitfalls that may be opened up by particular technologies, encouraging a complacent attitude to technology and an unjustified, naïve faith in the future. In Kling's words, the "glossy images" of utopian technological futures promoted by the media and others "ignore key social choices about *how to computerise* and the ways in which different forms of computerisation advance different values" (Kling 1996a, p. 23, emphasis in original; see also Sawhney 1996 and Berdayes and Berdayes 1998).

Critics have thus clearly been justified in calling to account the often unfounded optimism of many writing on technology. Broadly rejectionist critics of modern technological society such as Ellul, Horkheimer and Adorno, Mumford and Marcuse have made it increasingly apparent how technical systems relate to, make use of and reinforce existing power relationships. However, it is often unclear in the most systematically critical literature what role remains for human agency or democracy in

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<sup>19</sup> Malina (1999), and see Winner (1989), and Iacono and Kling (1996). This point will be the focus of the following part of this chapter.

modern technological society, or to what extent technology can function as a tool by which a vibrant public sphere of social life can be promoted, rather than operating as a negative, systematising, alienating, or restrictive force (Feenberg 1999, pp. *ix-xi*, and chapters 6-9 especially).

This is partially true even of many moderate or sophisticated critics of technology such as Habermas, who aims merely to restrict technology to the areas or uses to which it is deemed 'appropriate', and so avoid the negative impacts of technology on social interaction in the 'lifeworld'. Similarly, some eco-feminists hope for a reconstruction of scientific rationality based around what they see as the inherently feminine connection and empathy with the natural world. This perspective advances on earlier feminist perspectives on technology, which concentrated primarily on remedying the exclusion of women from what they say as a male dominated discipline, rather than questioning the ideological bases of science and technology (Wajcman 1991). While this represents a step away from the basically rejectionist critiques of modern technology, there are still problems.

Habermas associates technology at a fundamental level with the operation of pure Kantian 'rationality', which he regards as legitimate to the extent that it operates within its own rightful sphere. As others, particularly feminists and post-modernists, have pointed out, this ignores the inherent, exclusionary culture- and gender-specific values of this supposedly universal rationality. Habermas, and others like him, are in danger of precluding the critical investigation of technology operating within what he sees as its own appropriate 'rational' sphere, and thus also the potential for the development of non-, counter- or alternatively-rational forms of technology. The eco-feminist position has been criticised for taking an essentialist position with regard to gender and nature, while failing to recognise that concepts such as 'technology' and 'nature', and 'masculine' and 'feminine', are themselves socially constructed and historically specific (Gill and Grint 1995). These critiques fall within a developing body of literature on technology in society, that aims to draw the debate away from a focus on the qualities of technology itself and onto the social, political and economic structures that influence those qualities.

#### 4. The Techno-Structuralist Response to Determinism

While debates about technological issues have often been dominated by deterministic arguments, this is not to suggest that these are the only positions available. There are, populating the expansive middle ground between the futurists and the neo-Luddites, many sophisticated and balanced appraisals of the complex, often contradictory, impacts of technology in the modern world. Many of these authors have reached quite pessimistic conclusions regarding the potential of technology to improve human life. However, what distinguishes these critical authors from those described above as ‘technological dystopians’ is a willingness to discuss the positive potential of technologies and a concern for avoiding the determinism of dystopian writing, rather than concentrating on developing an expansive, all-encompassing critique of modern technological systems.

In recent years, a loosely-connected, heterogeneous body of literature has argued against the determinism of both futurists and neo-Luddites. This tendency has been given different names in different contexts (reflecting the diverse nature of its contributors). None of these terms have proved entirely satisfactory, but the most useful are probably ‘techno-structuralism’ (to use Tehranian’s term) and ‘techno-realism’<sup>20</sup>. The theoretical bases of techno-structuralism include elements from the pragmatic and critical theories of science and technology, in particular work by Dewey, as well as Kuhn, Habermas and Marcuse, as well as perspectives and techniques from political science, philosophy, sociology, feminism, cultural studies and media studies. Elements of the techno-structuralist perspective include general constructivist theories of socio-technical change and of the complex, ambivalent relationship between technics and society (including in

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<sup>20</sup> As suggested, there are difficulties giving a name to this ‘movement’ (to the extent that it is coherent and co-ordinated enough to merit the term), and neither of these is ideal. The term ‘techno-realism’ is a response to the hype and hyperbole that dominates much of the media discourse. Yet no doubt virtually all writers on technology would claim that their perspective is ‘realistic’, so the term seems unsatisfactory, despite being currently the most popular. Tehranian’s ‘techno-structuralism’ is more useful, since it points towards the detailed analysis of social, political and economic structures so often lacking in writing focused on technology. Once again, however, this term has its problems, since many of the most virulent criticisms of technology itself are tied to criticisms of the social, political and economic structures associated with modern forms of technology. Indeed, Tehranian’s own analysis draws on much of the critical school, particularly Habermas. I have chosen to use the term ‘techno-structuralism’ in this thesis, but I recognise its limitations.

particular recent work by Pinch, Bijker, Ihde, Noble, Winner, Marx, Silverstone, Sclove and Feenberg<sup>21</sup>), as well as those more specifically concerned with the development and application of particular technologies.

In the case of ICT, the most prominent authors arguing against the zealous, deterministic hyperbole of much of the discourse include Arterton, Dutton, Wilhelm, Winston, and Kling, though due to both the relative novelty of the technologies concerned and the broad scope of the movement it is somewhat difficult to identify particular 'leaders' or pre-eminent works. The authors that are associated with the techno-structuralist perspective often have considerable theoretical and methodological differences, and often quite divergent levels of optimism about the potential of ICT. What they have in common, however, is a commitment to cautious, balanced, and thorough scrutiny of the impact of ICT, taken as part of and shaped by broader socio-political systems. Techno-structuralism is characterised by a view of technology as being neither inherently positive, negative nor entirely neutral, but rather as the expression of social, political and economic structural leanings (see the Technorealism Overview 1998, and Tehranian 1990 pp. 4-6 and 212-4). It therefore represents a reaction to both the common preoccupation with technological solutions to social problems that dominates the media view of technology, but also to the tendency of some critical writing to ignore the potentially beneficial uses of technology in favour of total critique.

As much as anything, the work of these writers represents a call for a more considered, intelligent debate about the role of technology in our lives, and about the structures that support the development of particular approaches to technological issues (see for example the Conference on Technorealism 1998). The techno-structuralist perspective

argues that the effects of any given technology are not simply the result of the

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<sup>21</sup> Among the most important works on democratic sociotechnical change include Winner (1977, 1986), Bijker et al. (1987, 1992), Ihde (1990), Silverstone and Hirsch (1992), Marx (1994), Feenberg (1995, 1999), Sclove (1995), Mansell and Silverstone (1996).

independent or inevitable operations of the technology alone, or that a given technology naturally works in any single direction. Instead, these impacts are manifested as part of social, political and technical systems that are shaped by human choices, networks and power relations (See Winner 1986 and 1995, Nye 1997, Bijker et al. 1987 and 1992, Davies and Harvey 1994, and Smith 1994). These particular societal frameworks influence the form a technology takes, how it is conceived, how it is used, and therefore its consequences for different components of the system. The users of technology have a role in shaping these forms, meanings and effects by using technology in ways that suit their own values and interests; they 'domesticate' the technology by integrating it into their own patterns of life (Mansell and Silverstone 1996; see also Dutton et al. 2001, pp. 15-7).

The techno-structuralist perspective argues that ICT and other technologies are not, in themselves, inherently biased in any particular direction, be it towards surveillance or communication, globalised society or local community, or that their effects are beyond control or contestation (Winston 2001, pp. 161-5). Certainly, as what might somewhat crudely be described as feminist techno-structuralists such as Wajcman (1991), Kaufman-Osborn (1997), and Kirkup (2001) have argued, it is dangerous to ignore long-standing structural tendencies of Western technology towards the domination of women. But it is equally mistaken to respond with a deterministic rejection of technology itself, and so remove the possibility of reform of technology and the rationality that underlies it. The biases that can be seen in the actual uses of technology are in large part the result of *political* decisions or non-decisions, combined with and resultant from prevalent cultural attitudes to science and technology in the Western world.

As a number of case studies have recently begun to illustrate, the design, application, and effects of any given technological project vary from society to society, and from organisation to organisation, depending on a wide range of cultural and structural

factors<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, the design, uses and effects of any given technology, indeed, the very nature and definitions of the problems the technology is initially seen as addressing, can change over time as the technology is reconceived and modified by its users<sup>23</sup>. The picture of a passive public simply receiving and adapting to the latest technologies implied by technological determinists is clearly flawed. Indeed, as we will see in the discussion of ICT and politics, there have been many suggestions as to how the Internet itself may be used to link localised resistance movements and so counter the threat of a globalised, monolithic society.

The techno-structuralist critique of determinism in theoretical approaches to the role of technology in politics has clear implications for any discussion of online government and democracy. Deterministic visions of technologically crafted political and social utopias (and to a lesser extent dystopias) have informed a great deal of the debate surrounding ICT, and have clearly influenced many of the practical political applications to which these technologies have been put. In this thesis I focus on the discussion of ICT applications for politics and democracy, a discussion that like most regarding ICT has been dominated by vocal extremes offering highly contrasting visions of our future. It is therefore important to gain some understanding of the practical political applications to which ICT is being put and the goals of those applications (Dahlberg 1996). In the next section of this chapter, I will investigate the influence of general approaches to technology on specific discussions of the democratic applications of ICT.

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<sup>22</sup> See for example Tsagarousianou et al. (eds.) (1998) for a range of important case studies of a number of civic networking projects, which illustrate the difficulties and differences in the application of ICT to political issues in different societies. A growing body of literature shows the different possibilities arising from the use of ICT networks within a range of different organisation types, from universities to governments to large corporations. See for example Davies and Harvey (1994).

<sup>23</sup> Feenberg's (1995, chapters 7 and 5 respectively) accounts of the evolution in the uses of the French Minitel network and the AIDS computer network are extremely instructive in showing just how technologies may be reconceived by their users, even against the intentions and wishes of the system designers and administrators (this is a process that can be seen throughout the early evolution of ICT – see Nye (1997). A similar story can and indeed has been recounted with regard to the evolution of the Internet, particularly in its early manifestation as ARPANET (see Winston 2001 and Coyne 1995, chapter 4). These are examples of what Feenberg calls the 'interpretative flexibility' of technology. See also Kurland and Egan (1997).

### III THE INFLUENCE OF TECHNO-OPTIMISM IN APPROACHES TO ONLINE DEMOCRATIC POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

#### 1. Visions of ICT as a Tool for the Enhancement of Democracy

Many commentators have begun to argue that the Internet and its related ICTs could potentially help bring about something closer to an ideal form of 'democracy' than presently exists. This perspective expects that as the Internet and related technologies becomes ever more popular and accessible, popular communication about politics will become more widespread (Grossman 1995, Budge 1996, Lenk 1999). As a result, governments will be faced with increasing pressure from their citizens for greater involvement in the political system, leading to more democratic government and reduced domination by policy elites<sup>24</sup>. At the very least, it is expected that governments will be forced to both take a more active role on the internet in facilitating civic networks and providing information, contacts and services online, and also to pay more attention to public opinion as a result of the increased public and media scrutiny and debate (for example Bryan et al. 1998).

Some of the more enthusiastic supporters take this position to extremes, making arguments that seem to "imbue novel technologies with an almost mystical quality, revealed in their numerous incantations supporting technological solutions to political problems" (Wilhelm 2000, p. 20). These idealistic futurists expect the ICT revolution will bring about a "vast electronic *agora*", or in the words of Howard Rheingold, "an Athens without slaves"(Rheingold, quoted in Grossman 1995, p. 165). Even aside from more sensationalised accounts of the political use of ICT, there is a growing body of literature that suggests that the nature of political interaction via cyberspace is, on the whole, more

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<sup>24</sup> Symonds (2000, section 9), writing in the *Economist*, voices a popular view when he suggests that "in due course citizens will move from using the web to communicate with government to expecting to be able to cast online votes in a national election." Some (such as Grossman 1995) have suggested that when this happens, and as citizens become accustomed to voting online, governments will be forced to eventually allow increased broad-based participation in political issues, particularly through online referenda on important issues. For examples of these arguments, see Bryan et al. (1998), Coleman (1999a), Richard (1999), Barney (2000, pp. 17-25, and chapter 2).



democratic than most previous forms of interaction and information dispersion, particularly with regard to the mass media<sup>25</sup>. Many pundits, politicians, activists, political theorists and sociologists since the 1960s have argued that the particular technical characteristics of the new information and communication technologies makes them in some essential sense ‘democratic’<sup>26</sup>.

In support, enthusiasts point to particular characteristics of the structure of cyberspace itself as a platform for communication that, they argue, allows a far greater degree of genuine ‘democracy’ than has ever been possible before. However, these claims are often based on somewhat simplistic or one-sided understanding of the technologies themselves, and there is also little agreement as to what exactly is meant by ‘improved’ democracy (Moore 1999, pp. 55-9, Barney 2000, chapter 1). It is therefore important to examine in some detail the types of political uses to which ICT has been put, and the specific aims of those uses. To this end, this part of the chapter will briefly explore general optimistic approaches to the potential of ICT as a tool for enhancing democratic participation, the influence of these visions on governmental ICT projects, and critical perspectives on online government and democracy.

## **2. Governmental Approaches to the Concept of ‘Democracy’ in ICT Projects**

In recent decades there have been vast numbers of different projects aimed, either explicitly or by implication, at using ICT to promote public participation in government and enhance the operation of democratic politics. The majority of these projects have been non-governmental, being online civic education, information dispersion and

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<sup>25</sup> Authors recently making this sort of claim, though often somewhat indirectly, include Budge (1996), Friedland (1996), Berman and Weizner (1997), Kurland and Egan (1997), and Hale et al. (1999). Also, see below and in the following chapters for discussion of some specific arguments.

<sup>26</sup> Winner (1989), Tehranian (1990, chapter 5, and especially pp. 84-95), Coyne (1995, chapter 4), Friedland (1996), Bimber (1998), Tsagarousianou (1998a), Coleman (1999a), Moore (1999, pp. 42-4), Hague and Loader (1999, pp. 3-4) all discuss this popular idea that ICT, and especially the Internet, naturally promotes democratic forms of communication and organisation.

discussion projects established by independent political or community organisations or by interested individuals. A great deal of academic attention has focused on these non-governmental projects, as a means of establishing a new site for the rejuvenation of public information sharing and debate. However, as non-governmental projects have proliferated, there have been renewed calls for increased public participation and involvement in government. These calls appear to have met with some success; in recent years governments have begun to pay increasing attention to the possibilities of advanced ICTs in politics and governments.

Governments, in comparison to other organisations and individual members of the public, have been slow to develop programmes for the extensive use of ICT. However, the rapid development of ICT, and the accompanying proliferation of personal computers and other technologies, has seen a gradual rise in governmental interest in the new technologies. Increasingly, governments are focusing not just on providing a stable framework for public and commercial interaction, but are also beginning to make use of ICT as a means of improving the operations of the political process itself. Within government, modernisation projects have been underway for some years, aimed at improving the operation of bureaucratic processes through better intragovernmental communication and management of resources<sup>27</sup>. Of more importance in terms of democratic politics, the new interest in government in the potential of ICTs, particularly since the development of the Internet, has led to the establishment of numerous ICT-based governmental projects at both the local and central governmental levels. These projects range from public information dispersal projects, to initiatives aimed at online consultation with the public in policy-making, to direct voting programmes, all making use of a wide range of ICTs. Indeed, the sheer range of possible political applications of ICT is part of the problem, both for those attempting to design a political project making good use of ICT, and for those attempting to examine and analyse the political community in cyberspace.

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<sup>27</sup> For discussion of the evolution of governmental attempts to make use of ICT as a means of improving resource management and organisational efficiency, see Fletcher (1999), Holden (1999) and Seneviratne (1999).

While many different forms of governmental ICT project lay claim to 'democracy' as a principal goal, in reality this has different implications for the design of the project, depending on the model of democratic politics that the designers are focused on. Unfortunately, the practical application of ICT as a tool for government has often seemed confused or ill-focused (Winner 1989, Arterton 1989, Richard 1999). Certainly, there is a great complexity of choices available and technical issues to overcome for those designing any particular governmental project (including considerations such as which technologies to make use of, which features to include, how to develop an audience, how to control the content, and so on). More importantly, however, governmental ICT projects in particular have often been unclear as to how exactly 'democracy' is to manifest itself online.

From the early stages of the development of cyberspace onwards, those with an optimistic view of the potential of the technology for democratic participation in the public sphere have initiated projects that have failed to achieve the successes expected. Many projects have been discontinued or have quickly stalled in the face of rising costs, technological change, misuse, or public apathy (Hale et al. 1999). The particular reasons for these disappointments vary, but in general one of the most common has been a lack of clarity about exactly what the goals of the project are; what are the problems that the use of ICT is attempting to address, and how (Tsagarousianou 1998a)? Governments have numerous, related but potentially conflicting, aims in the establishment of ICT projects, including faster, cheaper and more efficient processes, better quality service interactions, better, more convenient citizen access to government, greater accountability, better policy decisions, improved public participation in policy-making (see Heeks 1999, Warren and Weschler 1999). It is not always clear which of these goals any particular governmental ICT project is primarily focused on achieving. This problem is only compounded when parties across the board lay claim with each different ICT project to the goal of the promotion of 'democracy'. Indeed, the term itself seems in danger of dilution and obfuscation through overuse (Schultz 1994, p. 108).

Despite the attractiveness of 'democracy' as an aim of ICT projects in governmental rhetoric, there are on investigation several, often competing, conceptions of how democracy may be promoted by the application of ICT to the political system. In actual application, different aspects of the rhetoric of democratic theory appeal to different interests and expectations about the roles of government, society and public sphere in the political system, and the application of ICT in those areas. There have thus been many different models of online democracy, each targeting different aspects of the political system and addressing different perceived problems. Moreover, it is rarely made clear as to how exactly each governmental ICT project will enhance democracy; instead, it is more often taken for granted that the value and good intentions of the project will be established by a simple appeal to 'democracy' in the abstract. As we shall see in later chapters, these differing expectations have serious implications for the application of ICT to political issues and attempts to expand and improve the public sphere.

Governments around the world have made frequent use of the rhetoric of democracy and utopianism, but it is often unclear as to how that rhetoric fits the actual practical political applications of those technologies. As suggested above, how we conceive of both these technologies and of democratic politics itself, including the metaphors and narratives that guide their use and the discussions of the issues in the public arena, will combined play vital roles in the ultimate development and application of ICT to political purposes. It would therefore be a mistake to ignore the importance of the ways in which our governments are already talking about and making use of these technologies, since this tells us a great deal about the role those governments see for their citizens in the political process. Chadwick and May's (2001) typology (and others like it - see in particular Abramson et al. 1988 pp. 18-31), which this thesis has adapted for the analysis of New Zealand approaches and which will be elaborated in the following three chapters, is particularly valuable in distinguishing between different governmental approaches to online democratic politics. Through an analysis of the governmental approaches to online democracy, and the issues that government ICT projects have encountered, it is possible to gain a fuller understanding of the role and potential of technology in politics. As the following section discusses, if it is to successfully advance the debate beyond the

determinism of much of the literature this understanding must be based on an awareness of the social, political and economic structures that influence the design and use of technology.

### **3. Techno-Structuralist Approaches to the Analysis of Online Politics: Power, Access and Technological Design and Use**

Arguments about the potential of cyberspace to democratise political life are generally based principally on reference to certain structural features of the communications networks themselves that are deemed conducive to democratic forms of interaction (Dutton 1996, p. 270). In particular, this includes the apparently decentralised nature of the networks and the increasingly low cost of access to them<sup>28</sup>.

However, whatever the truth of these points, they are based largely on reference to particular isolated features of the structure of the ICT networks that make up cyberspace, and this is only part of the story. Whatever the truth of claims about ICT's ability to enable more democratic forms of communication, it is dangerous to base claims such as this solely on particular characteristics of the technology itself, in isolation from an understanding of the broader context of those applications<sup>29</sup>. It is vital to understand how that technology interacts with and is affected by real world social, economic, and political conditions, which affect the actual practical uses to which a technology, once developed, will be put. It may perhaps be true that the technical properties of cyberspace could make many-to-many communication possible. However, the technical properties of the networks alone do not guarantee that this model of communication will succeed. The possibility for democratic many-to-many communication or increased citizen-

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<sup>28</sup> Wilhelm (1999), Malina (1999). For some explicit examples of this point, see Kurland and Egan (1996, pp. 390-1), Berman and Weitzner (1997), Moore (1999), and Warren and Weschler (1999).

<sup>29</sup> Bimber (1998) makes a similar point, calling attention in particular to the limits of human capacity and willingness to engage in a complex political life. For Bimber, the difficulty with attempts to promote political participation generally, and in particular through the application of ICT, is not so much technical, as social. Simply relying on ICT, in terms of greater access to political information and communication, may be naïve, although it would also be unwise to completely write off the value of ICT for political purposes, as Bimber largely does.

government communication may now exist, but this mere possibility does not translate into these models ever being fully adopted or proliferated.

This is especially true since practical political power remains, for the foreseeable future, in the hands of governments and other large organisations. While it is to a certain extent true that the possibility now exists for most people (at least, most people in advanced Western societies) to establish a voice in cyberspace and to communicate with others, it does not follow that all voices will be of equal political influence in interactions with government. Real-world economic and political power remains important in cyberspace, a point that is often obscured in the excitement over the potential of the technology to overcome other real world barriers (Kurland and Egan 1996, pp. 399-401, Sclove and Scheur 1996, Calhoun 1998, pp. 381-3). As many critics have argued, established powerful organisations and groups may in fact be in an ideal position to make use of the new technologies in less than democratic ways (see for example Schiller 1984, Davies and Harvey 1994, Robins and Webster 1999). Those political (and commercial) organisations with established real world positions of power will be, and indeed are, naturally seeking to defend that power in the virtual world by establishing a strong voice in cyberspace, and by attempting to limit or direct access to these networks<sup>30</sup>.

Many critics have pointed to both the importance and the difficulty of ensuring equal access to these technologies, given the largely privatised, commercial model that currently governs that access (see in particular Kurland and Egan 1996, pp. 399-401, Calhoun 1998, Malina 1999 and Dutton 1999). There is a danger that these technologies will indeed only benefit those already in an advantaged position, since they will be most able to make the best use of them. As mentioned earlier, further important questions have been raised regarding the quality of online social interaction as compared to face-to-face communication, and the value and purpose for political life of most online information,

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<sup>30</sup> Schultz (1994), Sclove and Scheuer (1996), Calabrese and Borchert (1996), Nixon and Johansson (1999, p. 147-8), Robbins and Webster (1999). Roscoe (1999) discusses the attempts being made to change the public perception of cyberspace from one of individual autonomy and discussion to a mass media akin to television. This process can also be seen in moves to develop an integrated 'set-top-box' experience, linking the Internet to cable television and so enabling the integration of the cyberspace into more prior, more easily controlled and commercialised communications networks.

among other concerns. These concerns will be raised and examined throughout this thesis in the context of the specific discussion of ICT and politics. Most futurists seem reluctant to seriously address these objections, preferring to focus instead on glorious possibilities created by the latest technological advances. Those, such as Rheingold (1993), who do consider these objections tend to only accept them to the degree that they represent the corruption of what would otherwise be fundamentally a democratic technology.

Against the complacency of many supporters of technological progress, and the too-hasty rejectionism of some critics, techno-structuralist authors such as Andrew Feenberg (1999, p. 76ff) argue that “there is no unique correlation between technological advance and the distribution of social power”, just as the effects of a technology are not predetermined solely by the design of that technology. Depending on how and where it is developed, applied and used, any given technology may centralise or decentralise power, or more often do both simultaneously in different ways and areas; similarly, it may undermine or reinforce social hierarchy. In the case of any given political ICT project, just as in the design of a political system or set of laws, there are certain features that could be considered democratic that may or may not be included, such as feedback or voting mechanisms, discussion areas, open, unmoderated discussion, links to other related communities, and so on (Docter and Dutton 1999, pp. 222-4; see also Coleman 1999 and Wilhelm 1999). Depending on the goals of the project, the designers may or may not consider these features valuable and worthy of inclusion; the mere possibility of their inclusion does not guarantee that this will happen. This is therefore not a purely inevitable or democratic process; any given political ICT project is only as democratic as the system designer wishes it to be, based on the goals of the project and/or the conception of democracy being used (Davies and Harvey 1994, pp. 131-6).

The question regarding the future impacts or potential of ICT for democratic politics is thus one of appropriate technical design, rather than simple technological inevitability, something too often overlooked by those interested in the study of these new technologies. As Feenberg argues, given the ubiquity, attractiveness and enormous potential of ICT, “the real struggle is not between the computer and low tech alternatives,

but within the realm of possibilities opened by the computer itself' (Feenberg 1999, p. 191). The choices over which of these possibilities to accept and apply, and the effects of those applications, will be made by governments, markets and societies, not simply dictated by technological progress (Docter and Dutton 1999). Furthermore, the way in which a technology is conceived, the metaphors used to conceptualise the nature of the technology and the narratives used to guide the understanding of its applications, all impact on the actual development and use of those technologies<sup>31</sup>. As Nardi and O'Day (1999) put it, "the name of a technology identifies what it means to the people who use it ... in a sense it positions it directly under the control of its users." It is therefore important to examine how those with control over the design and use of ICT think about these technologies, since this will influence their evolution and the uses to which they are put.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This chapter has sought to place recent discussions of ICT and politics within broader traditions of the analysis of technology, and to point to particular weaknesses of those traditions. As part two of the chapter noted, the general, optimistic focus of much popular literature on technological advancement as a panacea has influenced many recent discussions of democratic politics. While a number of critics have raised important objections to this rosy view of the potential of technology in politics, these objections have often been raised in a quite dogmatic manner, and have often failed to seriously consider the positive potential of technology. As a result, their conclusions have been too easily marginalised from the popular discourse, and as such have been of limited

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<sup>31</sup> Dordick and Lehman (1994), Sclove and Scheuer (1996), Sawhney (1996) and Berdayes and Berdayes (1998) all provide interesting discussions of the role of metaphor in the ongoing development of technology, particularly in the case of ICT. These articles have been unanimous in their criticism of metaphors such as the 'information superhighway' and comparisons to other mass media such as newspapers, radio and television in descriptions of cyberspace. They argue variously that these are inaccurate, restrictive descriptions of the nature of communication on computer networks, encouraging an unhelpful view of cyberspace as being dominated by elites in its design and maintenance, ordered, easy to access, uncommunicative, and a source of information rather than a realm of communication. In so doing, these metaphors and narratives discourage a more positive, democratic vision of cyberspace as an interactive, open, unregulated realm of interaction and communication between people.



effectiveness in prompting further critical discussion of the relationships between technology and politics. A more moderate, balanced approach is thus called for, one that takes account of the potential usefulness of certain features of advanced technologies, while also recognising the limitations on technology imposed by the structural frameworks that influence the development and application of these technologies.

The development of a governmental literature on ICT-based democratic politics provides an ideal opportunity to analyse the potential of technology. While a great deal of the literature has focused on the non-governmental uses of ICT in politics, the established position of government in the political system means that the ultimate direction of the evolution of online politics is likely to be influenced to a large extent by the approaches taken by various governments. Governments have recently begun to draw upon the language of optimistic proposals for online political development, and to establish ICT projects with the stated aim of improving the operation of democratic politics. It is therefore vital that balanced and sophisticated analysis of specific governmental approaches to technological politics be undertaken, with the aim of advancing the debate on technology and politics.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE GOVERNMENTAL PROVISION OF ONLINE CONTENT: INFORMATION AND SERVICE**

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

In recent years a great deal of hype has surrounded the development of the 'information society' and new forms of 'online government', with advanced ICTs being touted as solutions to a number of political problems. Governments around the world, while relatively slow to make use of ICT, have recently begun to realise the potential of these technologies to improve the operations of government processes, particularly by facilitating the provision of more and better governmental information and services to their citizens. Around the world, numerous governmental and non-governmental ICT projects have been initiated in recent years, most primarily attempting to make use of the informational capabilities of the new technologies to transmit information about government services and processes. Hopes have been high among many both inside and outside of government that the ability of ICT to process, publish and transmit vast quantities of information quickly and inexpensively will provide the key to the improvement of politics and democracy.

This chapter will examine these hopes, in the context of an analysis of current governmental ICT projects and literature. Part one will discuss the growth of international interest in the governmental applications of ICT, and outline the types of claims being made with regard to the online provision of governmental information and services. The second part of the chapter will focus in more detail on the approach to the provision of online information and services taken by New Zealand governments, concentrating on the analysis of recent governmental policy with regard to 'e-government'. Part three will explore the governmental approach to the provision of

online information and services, primarily considering governmental expectations regarding the use of ICT as a tool for the promotion of political involvement.

## **II. RECENT TRENDS IN INTERNATIONAL GOVERNMENTAL INFORMATION AND SERVICE PROVISION ONLINE**

As advanced ICTs have developed, eventually leading to the birth and massive growth of the Internet in the mid 1990s, governments have gradually begun to perceive their potential as a means of overcoming numerous traditional problems of access to government. Governmental perceptions of the value of ICT in the provision of information and services are key in driving this view of the importance of these technologies for government. The majority of central governmental ICT projects in particular have utilised ICT primarily as a means of providing more convenient access to government information and services, as opposed to encouraging more direct citizen participation in politics (see Arterton 1987, Abramson et al. 1988, Brants et al. 1996, pp. 237-8, Tsagarousianou 1998a, Tambini 1998, Chadwick and May 2001). In recent years, as the technologies have evolved, the provision of government services has come to be more obviously important in governmental ICT projects.

As a result of the proliferation of ICT, governments, as with all businesses, expect to be better able to tailor their service provision to the needs and desires of their citizens (Rash 1997, chapter 8, Weiland 1996). The result will be lower cost, more efficient government administration through the elimination of unnecessary waste, as governments will be able to provide a wider range of services, more efficiently, more conveniently, to more people (Richard 1999, Milner 1999, pp. 70-2). Citizens will be able to more easily register their preferences with government, due to the ease of information transmission and through the increased use of polling and performance review (Grossman 1995, Rash 1997, Richard 1999). The governmental use of ICT as a means of providing services online has rapidly begun to increase in the last few years, and in most advanced nations it is now possible to perform any number of service-related interactions with government. The majority of

these governments have plans to significantly advance current levels of online service provision, aiming to make all major governmental services available online in the near future<sup>32</sup>.

While online governmental service provision has a number of important implications for the operation of government in the future, most discussions of the potential of ICT for government and politics have centred on the informational capabilities of ICT, particularly in terms of the provision of online political information. Arguments in favour of public information programmes using ICT have a quite long history, and became particularly popular with the success of the personal computer and other information-processing technologies (Arterton 1987, Dutton 1999, pp. 85-6, Lenk 1999). The Internet and the various technologies that support it have long been associated with information at a fundamental level; indeed, they are commonly known simply as 'information technologies', rather than the more difficult 'information and communication technologies'. In politics, politicians and analysts have argued that the wealth of information now available to virtually everybody in developed societies will enable better quality political systems, more efficient and effective government, and more active, informed democracy (Fletcher 1999, pp. 94-5).

Information is vital to all forms of decision making, since without good quality information, decisions are made in the dark. Better information at the administrative, legislative and executive levels will hopefully produce better governmental decisions (Rash 1997, chapter 8, Coleman et al. 1999, Mulder 1999). The value of ICT in this area is clear, through hugely increased speed and scale of information transmission and processing (Dahlberg 1996, Sawney 1996, Kurland and Egan 1997). Moreover, democratic theory, particularly in its Jeffersonian forms, argues that it is vital that the

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<sup>32</sup> Taylor and Burt's (1999) discussion of parliamentary web sites is valuable here. They note that "parliaments are not, of course, service providers, and whilst we found some small evidence of 'service provision', broadly defined, our research findings show that this is the least developed aspect of parliamentary support for democratic activity" (Taylor and Burt 1999, p. 147). Services were, however, being offered from a number of parliamentary sites, particularly with regard to the ordering of parliamentary publications and job vacancies. As has been the case across the rest of government, the online service-related activities of parliaments are likely to expand markedly in the near future.

public as a whole has access to good quality education and information about the activities of government if it is to act as an effective check on the abuse of governmental power (Aikens 1999). With the development of these new technologies, enthusiasts argue that the public will be able to gain access to more information than ever before. With this vastly improved access to information and better civic education, many hope that the effectiveness of our democracies may be greatly improved (for examples of these kinds of arguments, see Grossman 1995, Kurland and Egan 1997, Hague and Loader 1999, and Docter and Dutton 1999).

Governmental ICT projects have generally been based to a large extent on the expectation that providing easier access to more and better political information will gradually create a more informed, more politically active public (Grossman 1995, Hacker 1996, Hale et al. 1998, Coleman 1999b, Fletcher 1999, Milner 1999)<sup>33</sup>. This is an attractive image, to be sure, and one that has been supported to some degree by most studies of levels of public political participation. Generally, those groups most likely to actively participate in politics have been those most likely to be well-informed about politics: the educated, and those who make frequent use of the media (for evidence of this trend, see Verba et al. 1978, pp. 122-4, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, pp. 45-50 and Althaus 1996). On the basis of this fact, many expect that increasing the quality and quantity of information available is likely to improve the quality and quantity of public political engagement (Schultz 1994, Bimber 1998; for examples of this reasoning, see Grossman 1995, Dutton 1999, chapter 7). Since ICT is so renowned for its ability to effectively transmit enormous quantities of information exceedingly quickly, it appears to make sense to make extensive use of ICT in any attempt to improve the governmental provision of political information (Warren and Weschler 1999).

Governmental ICT projects, at both local and central levels, have to a large degree concentrated on these informational potentials of ICT, both in terms of improving the operations of government itself and in providing citizens with information online. As Elisabeth Richard (1999, p. 71) notes, “like other western countries, the main concern of

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<sup>33</sup> For similar claims about the ability of ICT to improve the quality of education, see Lax (2001).

the Canadian federal government in establishing web sites has been to disseminate information.” Similarly, Taylor and Burt (1999, p. 145), note that “the provision of general, ‘educational’ information represents the largest single component of most web sites.” In the United States, the National Information Infrastructure promoted by Al Gore was based on a belief in the importance of information and communications technology in the future, both in government and beyond, and stressed the importance of easy and equitable access to government information<sup>34</sup>. In the words of the European Commission’s ‘high-level expert group’, “the Information Society should be about people. We must put people in charge of information, rather than it being used to control them” (European Commission 1996, quoted in Bryan et al., 1998, p. 11). The following passage, from a 1996 British House of Lords select committee report, sums up optimistic governmental appraisals of the value of ICT.

The world is undergoing a technological revolution and entering the age of the Information Society. The combination of information technology and high speed communications is breaking down the traditional barriers to the movement of information (distance, location, time and volume) at an unprecedented rate. Information technology is becoming widely accessible and as a result a vast new range of applications and opportunities is arising. (Select Committee on Science and Technology 1996, p. 2)

Most major governments around the world have in recent years established individual web sites for most or all governmental agencies and institutions, providing online access to specific policy information and government services. At the local level, many of the earliest and most ambitious governmental ICT projects were initiated, making use of a

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<sup>34</sup> For discussion of the NII and the US ICT programme in general, see Chadwick (2001, pp. 17-20), Sawhney (1996) and Hacker (1996), as well as Tsagarousianou (1998a), and Dutton (1999 pp. 85-6). For an interesting discussion on the relationship between utopian policy debates surrounding America’s NII and Japan’s Information Infrastructure, see West (1996).

wide variety of ICTs from the telephone, to radio, to television, to computer networks<sup>35</sup>. In recent years, the birth and rapid rise of the World Wide Web has led to an explosion of local ICT initiatives focusing on the provision of political information over the Internet. By 1996, for example, over 1000 US cities had established a homepage on the web (Docter and Dutton 1998), while by 1998 Hale et al. (1999) were able to identify 290 municipal web sites in California alone. Most of these governmental projects have remained focused on the better provision of governmental information and services, though, as will be discussed in later chapters, some have attempted to make use of ICT to enable active citizen participation in policy making.

Despite this explosion of governmental interest in ICT, governmental ICT projects have faced a number of difficulties. The detail and presentation of online governmental content has varied widely, even within each individual government, with individual institutions often being left to develop their own standards (Taylor and Burt 1999). As Coleman (1999b, p. 15) notes, “many people know that they need information, but lack the procedural knowledge to know what type of information they require”, yet governmental sites have often “been constructed on the assumption that users possess such procedural knowledge.” The information that governmental sites have provided has tended to be formulated on the basis of similar assumptions of prior knowledge and experience of the political system, and overall these sites have often been a challenging proposition for anyone not fully familiar with the specifics of each agency concerned (Coleman 1999b, pp. 15-6, and see also the various case studies in Coleman et al. (eds.) 1999 for similar experiences).

As a result of these difficulties, in the last few years most central governmental online information projects have increasingly focused on developing single ‘portal’ or ‘gateway’ web sites, providing a unified centre for access to all government information and services. The most prominent of these have been those established by the governments of

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<sup>35</sup> For examples and discussion of some of these early attempts, see Arterton (1987 and 1989), Friedland (1996) and Dutton (1999). Moreover, as will be discussed elsewhere, Wresh (1996), Huesca (1995), Okunna (1995) and Hall (1998) all provide valuable discussion of more basic attempts at the use of ICT for political purposes in developing countries.

Singapore (<http://www.ecitizen.gov.sg> and <http://www.gov.sg>), the United Kingdom (<http://www.number10.gov.uk> and <http://www.ukonline.gov.uk>, which now incorporates the formerly stand-alone government portal, <http://www.open.gov.uk>) and the United States (<http://www.firstgov.com> and <http://www.whitehouse.gov>). However, other governments, such as Australia (<http://www.centrelink.gov.au> and <http://www.fed.gov.au>), the Netherlands (<http://www.ol2000.nl>), Canada (<http://canada.gc.ca>) and New Zealand (<http://www.govt.nz>, which will be discussed below and in later chapters) have developed similar sites.

For the most part, central governmental portal sites operate in a similar fashion (Taylor and Burt 1999). These sites tend to avoid the provision of broader or more detailed political news or information (although the British portal sites are exceptions), instead providing links to the various government agencies themselves, where specific policy information (such as policy documents, speeches and presentations) can generally be found. These sites are generally divided between the provision of information and increasingly providing means of conducting transactions with government and accessing other services. The information provided is similarly divided between information about government services and general information about the structure and operations of government and the political system, along with general information about the country itself. The development of governmental 'portals' to online government are intended to overcome some perceived difficulties in accessing online governmental information. The complex structure of government inevitably leads to a plethora of individual institutional web pages, often poorly inter-linked. By establishing a single 'gateway' for public access to government, where linkages between governmental agencies are generally arranged in a simple, attractive format, governments hope that many of the difficulties in using government information and services may be overcome.

In the context of these international expectations and experiences, the remainder of this chapter will examine the developing approaches of New Zealand governments, both central and local, to the provision of online political information.



### **III. E-GOVERNMENT AND ONLINE GOVERNMENTAL INFORMATION AND SERVICE PROVISION IN NEW ZEALAND**

#### **1. The Governmental Provision of Online Information and Services in New Zealand**

To a large extent, governmental ICT projects in New Zealand have followed dominant patterns of international governmental practice. The focus of governmental ICT use at both the local and central levels has been on using ICT to simplify and improve existing governmental processes, and on exploring the possibilities of the World Wide Web in interactions with citizens. Governmental web sites have principally focused on the online publishing of information, though the provision of government services online is becoming increasingly prevalent.

At the local level, most of New Zealand's territorial authorities have now established web sites on the World Wide Web. At the time of writing, only 13 of New Zealand's 74 city and district councils were yet to create an online presence. Local governments in New Zealand have had considerable independence in developing their own approach to online government, though central governmental has provided guidance and technical support through programmes such as Local Government Community On Line (see Local Government Community Online 2002). Local governments have however been free to determine the extent to which they adopt the New Zealand Government's e-government programme (see SSC 2001a, pp. 6-7, SSC 2001c pp. 21-2).

Without exception, local governmental web sites have been primarily concerned with the provision of information to citizens. Moreover, while the format and presentation of online information has varied between individual local governmental sites, the types of content provided has been very consistent. The most basic sites provide details of current councillors, basic information about the role and operations of the council, and generally some information about the local area. More advanced sites provide more in-depth information, such as biographies of councillors, election results, meeting minutes, council

policy documents and press releases, and a wide range of detailed information about government services. Currently, opportunities to actually make use of local government services online are very limited, but many major councils have plans to make many more services available online in the future.

As has been the case internationally, there is a clear division in quality between the web sites of local governments in New Zealand. All 15 of New Zealand's city councils have established web sites, against only 46 of New Zealand's 59 district councils. Moreover, the 13 regional councils that currently have no online presence are concentrated in the poorer, more isolated areas of New Zealand, particularly in the central North Island in areas such as the Bay of Plenty, Hawkes Bay, Taranaki and Manawatu. The council web sites of the main centres of population are generally quite comprehensive in their information available, easily navigable, and very well presented. The most developed, up-to-date, and best-presented web sites have been established by local councils based in the larger towns and cities. In contrast, regional councils, particularly those based in poorer areas or covering large, thinly populated areas, have tended to establish far more basic web sites, containing very little information. This is a point that will be returned to, but it is important to note here that there is a considerable discrepancy in the types of governmental information and services available from the less well-resourced of New Zealand's city councils.

As has at the local government level, the information- and service-provision capabilities of ICT have from the outset been key in the New Zealand Government's vision for what it calls 'e-government'. Until recently, the New Zealand Government's ICT projects have for the most part consisted of the establishing of a large number of individual governmental web sites, at the level of individual agencies. The various institutional web sites, run by each individual agency or institution, have operated in a similar manner to overseas sites, primarily focusing on the provision of information in various forms. As seen internationally, this generally consists of background information about the role of the department or ministry, information about the services it provides, latest news, and often some or all recent reports or publications. The sites also offer contact information,

and some have also begun to provide services online. For the most part, these sites have changed little since their introduction, apart from superficial changes in presentation.

Besides these departmental and ministerial web sites, several other central governmental sites have been created, providing home pages for, most importantly, the New Zealand Parliament ([www.parliament.govt.nz](http://www.parliament.govt.nz)), Cabinet ([www.executive.govt.nz](http://www.executive.govt.nz)) and the Prime Minister ([www.primeminister.govt.nz](http://www.primeminister.govt.nz)), as well as a separate all-of-government web site, New Zealand Government Online (NZGO, [www.govt.nz](http://www.govt.nz)). These sites have been created expressly for the purpose of providing political information online, and as such are of particular interest here. Parliament's web site provides relatively basic information about the structure of Parliament and Select Committees, sitting times, and current business, along with biographies of MPs, a few links to major political parties and online news sources in New Zealand, and basic contact information. The Cabinet home page focuses on current news and issues; aside from providing brief ministerial biographies and contact information, there is no information about Cabinet's role or structure. Instead, an extensive selection of past ministerial press releases, speeches, newsletters and policies is available, though only dating back to the beginning of Labour's term in office, as well as latest news snippets. The Prime Minister's page sits somewhere between the two, offering some information about the structure of New Zealand government (and a small section on past Prime Ministers), a section for young people, and prime ministerial press releases and current news.

The all-of-government site, NZGO, is perhaps the most interesting of these governmental web sites. NZGO is intended to be the gateway to New Zealand government, providing a single point from which other governmental sites and information may be accessed. It was originally formed from the amalgamation of two previous government sites run by the Ministry of Commerce and the Department of Internal Affairs. The amalgamated version was released in September 1999 by the National Government, along with a vision statement for the operation of government online. NZGO, like most government web sites, has changed little since its establishment, continuing to provide periodically-updated information and links in the same style and format. NZGO provides brief, fairly

basic information on New Zealand and its political system, as well as an extensive range of contacts for both local and central government, which will be discussed in a later chapter. While NZGO provides the broadest range of political information of the governmental web sites, it is fair to say that this information is not particularly comprehensive (the site focuses for the most part on providing links elsewhere), and the web site on the whole is not well presented.

The provision of political information has been of fundamental important in governmental ICT use, although the approach to that provision has been neither systematic nor integrated at either the local or central governmental levels. The various governmental web sites have provided different sorts of information, in different forms and levels of detail, while the level of presentation in governmental web sites has varied considerably. Despite these fairly inauspicious beginnings, however, the Government has in the last few years indicated that it views the Internet as of primary importance for the future of government, and that information is a key aspect of a coming revolution of government processes.

## **2. First Steps Towards 'E-Government' under National: The September 1999 Vision Statement**

In September of 1999 the National Government authorised an e-government vision statement developed by the State Services Commission and the Chief Executives' Group on Information Management and Technology. This statement outlined plans for the development of an extensive ICT programme, to be gradually introduced over a period of years, that would have significant impacts across many governmental processes. In answer to the question "why e-government?", the vision states that:

Information is the life-blood of government. It is a foundation for everything government does – making policies, creating and delivering services, and administering regulations.

The quality of government policies, decisions and services matters to all of us – they're vital to the social and economic wellbeing of all New Zealanders.

E-government is about doing these things better in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. (SSC 1999, vision, p. 1)

Clearly then, the authors of the vision statement see the ability of ICT to enhance the governmental provision of information in particular as a powerful tool in the future. Indeed, their faith in the ability of ICT to improve the operations of government in the future is striking. Since information is seen as “the life-blood of government”, and since ICT is so strongly associated with the more effective manipulation and transmission of information, it clearly follows that widespread governmental use of ICT will have beneficial effects across all of government’s functions. Making policies, creating services, administering regulations – all will be improved by the introduction of e-government.

From the outset it was also made clear that key goals of the e-government programme were the online provision of government services and the utility of ICT in improving the speed, effectiveness and efficiency of government processes. For example, among a range of applications, the vision statement states that “government services will be tailored to the particular needs of the individual citizen” (SSC 1999, p. 4) and that:

People will benefit from the fact that government is using the power of information technology as efficiently and effectively as possible. Administrative processes will be streamlined... Greater value will be leveraged from current infrastructures. The bottom line costs of technology will be managed downwards. (SSC 1999, p. 4)

Combined, expectations for the online provision of government information and services have formed the major focus of the e-government literature from its earliest beginnings in New Zealand under National. The National Government’s September 1999 vision statement clearly represented the early efforts of the State Services Commission to develop an approach to e-government. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that many of the more important concepts expressed within were not expanded or explained to any great degree. Later documents would take up the task of outlining in more detail the government’s plans for its use of ICT, the first of which was a new vision statement prepared under the authority of the incoming Labour Government and released in May 2000. While there was change of government near the end of 1999, this focus of the e-

government programme has not altered under the new Labour Government. In fact, as the e-government programme has developed, both the importance being given to the technologies and the primary status of information- and service-centred applications of ICT have, if anything, become more clearly and strongly articulated. Labour's approach to e-government will be examined in the following sections of this part of the chapter.

### **3. The Early Development E-Government in New Zealand under the Labour Government**

Labour ministers from a relatively early stage began to quite consistently emphasise the practical political applications of ICT for central government in particular. The most important concrete results of this new focus on e-government were the development of a new vision statement outlining the Government's intentions for the future of governmental ICT use, released on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May, 2000, and the establishment in July that year of the E-Government Unit. Yet even before the establishment of the E-Government Unit, Government ministers under Labour had certainly been willing to promote ICT as an important tool for government in the present and future. In April 2000, the new Minister for Information Technology, Paul Swain, provided a particularly explicit example of this new technology-focused Government attitude, when he said, "our vision with e-government is to provide better government services and information electronically, and to build a better relationship between government and citizens. It is as important as the future of democracy itself" (Swain 2000a, p. 4). The Government without doubt quickly accepted that technology had moved on, and was forcing the development and adoption of new systems to make use of these changes. For example, Swain stated that "the information age has arrived, it's no longer just the talk of tomorrow. The New Government is faced with an undeniable imperative – to adapt government in New Zealand to the information age" (Swain 2000c, pp. 1-2).

Of course, proclaiming the necessity of change in a changing world does not in of itself predetermine the direction that adaptation may take. It was therefore not until the

development of the Labour Government's e-government vision statement, which built on and refined the previous version developed under the National Government, that the new Government's overall approach to ICT's implications for politics began to emerge. Once again, being a vision statement, it remained at the level of generalities, but it did provide a somewhat clearer picture of the approach of central government to issues of information and democracy, and the importance of e-government in the future operation of politics. On the release of the vision statement, the Minister of State Services, Trevor Mallard, suggested in a press release that "e-government offers some fantastic opportunities" and "is an important part of the future of democracy" (Mallard 2000d, p. 1). The Labour Government's vision statement itself is similarly striking in its faith in the potential of ICT in politics, and the driving force of technology in necessitating the development of new forms of political interaction. The key vision of the Labour Government's e-government vision statement is that "New Zealanders will be able to gain access to government information and services, and participate in our democracy, using the Internet, telephones and other technologies as they emerge" (SSC 2000, p. 1). This is in fact the first sentence of the document, and is clearly intended to be fundamentally representative of the Government's position on the political applications of ICT (see Mallard 2000c, pp. 1, 3). The vision statement goes on to offer this depiction of e-government:

A world-wide revolution in information and communications technologies is occurring. The Internet, the personal computer, and the mobile phone are fundamentally changing our lives, affecting the way we work, learn, and interact.

E-Government is a way for governments to use the new technologies to provide people with more convenient access to government information and services, to improve the quality of the services and to provide greater opportunities to participate in our democratic institutions and processes. E-Government presents New Zealand with some tremendous opportunities to move forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with high quality, cost-effective, government services and a better relationship between New Zealanders and their government. (SSC 2000, p.1)

Here again in the first paragraph we see a powerful expression of the Government's belief in the all-pervading influence of modern technology on society, and the necessity of quickly developing appropriate responses. Moreover, it is clear from the second paragraph that these developments are viewed in a fundamentally positive light. The more efficient provision of government services is again an important component of the

Government's vision of the future. The vision statement claims that "people will get better services from government agencies" (SSC 2000, p. 1) as a result of e-government, and particularly that "people will receive more integrated services because different government organisations will be able to communicate more effectively with each other". Here we see an important aspect of the attractiveness of ICT for Government. Not only will ICT allow more cost-effective service interactions between the public and government, but it will also enable the improvement of organisational efficiency within government itself, speeding and improving governmental decision-making and other processes.

Among the specific ways in which e-government will improve the quality of government:

*People will be better informed because they can get up-to-date and comprehensive information about government laws, regulations, policies and services.*

For example if a person wants to transport an oversize load of materials by truck or trailer from one side of town to the other, he or she has to get a hold of the appropriate road safety regulations, which are available only in a printed form.

Making that kind of information available on the Internet will improve peoples' ability to go about their leisure or work-time activities safely and within the law.

(SSC 2000 p. 2, italics in original)

This is the first specific indication as to how the Government believes that the better quality and use of information made possible by ICT will improve the operation of the political system. Yet this formulation seems curiously opposed to other, more grandiose claims about the role of information in promoting political involvement and participation. In the example, the purpose of better political information is centred on simply "improving people's ability to go about their ... activities safely and within the law" (SSC 2000, p. 3). The focus of the provision of government information here seems to rest on the improvement of the quality and convenience of government services, rather than encouraging political awareness, involvement or participation. People may be able to become more informed if more "up-to-date and comprehensive information about government laws, regulations, policies and services" (ibid.) is made available (there is reason to doubt this; see below). But if the goal of them doing so is merely the smoother operation of government services, is this really the 'revolution' in politics and government that has been hoped for?



Despite this reservation, the Government continued to promote 'e-government' as a development of key importance, not just for the civil service but for the operation of the entire political system and democracy itself. In July 2000, the E-Government Unit of the State Services Commission was established, with surprisingly little public fanfare. The Unit was given the responsibility for developing the overarching e-government strategy, providing advice and facilitating the development of e-government across government agencies (see Mallard 2000c, p. 3 and E-Government Unit 2001). In a speech made not long after the establishment of the E-Government Unit Paul Swain stated that "one way of describing what the Government intends to achieve from its e-government programme is a transition from an industrial age government to an information age one", and that "in other words e-government is about the future of democracy" (Swain 2000b, p. 1). More specifically, Trevor Mallard argued that, as a result of e-government, "people will be better informed and better able to participate in our democracy" (Mallard 2000a, p. 4, also see p. 5).

In these passages we again see the association between better information (enabled by ICT) and better democratic participation, described in part one of this chapter, that has informed most international attempts to make use of ICT for political purposes. Indeed, this approach to information and politics clearly serves as a fundamental basis of the Government's e-government programme. The importance of 'information' as a key concept in e-government became even clearer as the details of the programme were developed throughout 2001, beginning with the release of the e-government strategy document in April, which will be examined in the next section.

#### **4. 'Information', 'Service' and Technology in the Government's Recent Policy Documents: The 2001 E-Government Strategy and the Portal Strategy**

The Labour Government's first major e-government strategy document, *Government.nz@your.service*, was released on 26 April 2001, amid some fanfare. Both

Prime Minister Helen Clark and Minister of State Services Trevor Mallard were involved in promoting the new strategy through presentations and press releases, highlighting the broad importance of e-government and ICT in general. For example, Mallard writes:

The Government's strategy for creating e-government in New Zealand is an initiative that will contribute to New Zealand's entry into the information age. And its going to have a major, and positive, impact on the lives of all New Zealanders.

E-government is basically about using the power of the Internet to change the way government works, and plays out its role in people's lives. (Mallard 2001b, p. 1)

The e-government strategy represents the most coherent picture of the ultimate form the government intends e-government to take. The three "essential characteristics of e-government" are defined by the strategy document as being:

**Convenience and Satisfaction**

Customers will be able to access government information and services using channels that are convenient, easy to use and deliver what is wanted.

**Integration and Efficiency**

Information and services will be integrated, packaged and presented to minimise cost for both customers and departmental administration.

**Participation**

New technologies will enable easier access to government information and processes. People will be better informed and better able to participate. (SSC 2001a, pp. 6-8)

In this section of the strategy the importance of efficiency and other economic considerations in the Government's expectations for e-government are particularly explicit. It is made clear here that a primary consideration of e-government's success will be the extent to which it improves the bottom-line efficiency of government operations, and provides 'convenient and satisfying' access to government information and services. A key aspect of online government will be the development of the Government's online portal. These plans were expanded on in the two portal strategy documents (SSC 2001b and 2001c) that followed the publication of the e-government strategy:

The development of this portal will provide all New Zealanders [with] a single window into the operations and services of their Government. Over time the portal will allow customers to find the information and services they seek, [and] transact services in a safe and convenient electronic environment. (SSC 2001b, p. 4)

Despite the positive depictions of online government through the expanded portal, the actual plans for the portal itself appear somewhat cautious, and are clearly focused primarily on minimising the costs of the portal while improving the efficiency of government functions. Early in the 'high level implementation plan' of the portal strategy it states that "it is important to remember that the portal is a facilitator and an enabler. By itself, the implementation of the portal will not deliver transactions and information online" (SSC 2001c, p. 6, see also SSC 2001b, p. 13). The strategy overview states that "the only exception will be where in providing information from the portal, value can be added to the customer by linking information from multiple agencies together or by providing sufficient contextual information from the portal for the customer to choose the information or service they require" (SSC 2001b, p. 23). The portal will thus "provide a 'doorway' for information and services from providers to customers, conveniently, faster, inexpensively and with no barriers to access" (SSC 2001b, pp. 13). The strategy overview's list of benefits that 'customers' will derive from the portal is similarly entirely focused on convenience and satisfaction benefits from e-government (see SSC 2001b, pp. 15-6, and also pp. 9-12 and 28-9).

The importance (and presumably the benefits) for e-government of more and better information use made possible by ICT can be seen in all three of the Government's objectives for e-government. Government clearly believes that more, better information will have beneficial effects on both the provision of government services and the quality of public participation in government. Convenient and efficient government, including the provision of government services, clearly depends on the effective processing of large quantities of information. More importantly here, under 'participation' the Government again equates the provision of government information with improved opportunities for democratic participation. This section advocates civic education and the promotion of political awareness as goals of e-government, concepts of central importance to discussions of the role of information in democratic politics. And again, this hope for improved public political involvement rests on the increased capacities for the provision of information made possible by new developments in information and communications

technologies. As an example of this approach to technology, information and political awareness, the strategy that will be pursued in support of the goal of participation is to:

- Make government information easier to find.
- Publish key government information online.
- Provide multiple channels for contact with government. (SSC 2001a, p. 8)

The latter of these strategies deals explicitly with encouraging political participation itself, and as such will be examined in detail in the following chapters. For the purposes of this discussion, however, the first two of these strategies are particularly interesting. In support of these strategies, the strategy states that e-government will, among other less relevant supporting activities:

- Catalogue government information.
- Drive the routine online publishing of key government information. (SSC 2001a, p. 8)

It is therefore reasonably clear, from the e-government strategy document, the vision statement and many other governmental sources, that the ability of ICT to improve the quantity and theoretically the quality of government information is of key importance in the e-government programme. The Government has consistently argued that the governmental provision of information and services online will, among other benefits, improve levels of political awareness, involvement and participation in New Zealand. So, the e-government strategy states that “easier access to services and information will lead to greater participation in democracy” (SSC 2001a p. 3). Since ICT certainly allows considerably quicker and easier access by many more people to vast quantities of information, the Government believes that it follows that widespread government provision on online information is likely to have these effects on a large scale, across society. This assumption is repeated elsewhere in the document, and in the portal strategy documents that followed it (see for example SSC 2001b, p. 19). Yet for all the attractiveness of this vision, it is important to examine these issues closely, particularly in the context of the Government’s broader ‘managerial’ approach to the provision of information and services. This will be the task of the final part of this chapter.

#### **IV. INFORMATION, SERVICE AND THE MANAGERIAL APPROACH TO THE ONLINE PROVISION OF GOVERNMENT INFORMATION AND SERVICES**

##### **1. The Managerial Approach to Online Government**

In concentrating on the provision of information and services in its e-government programme, the New Zealand Government has adopted an approach that parallels most major international governmental initiatives, particularly by central governments. Chadwick and May (2001, pp. 12-3) describe as this approach as 'managerial'. This approach primarily attempts to make use of ICT as a means of improving the efficiency of the operations of existing governmental structures, in terms of reducing the cost and increasing the speed of those operations. This particularly involves improving the ability of government agencies to make decisions and to communicate with each other, by enabling the more effective processing and sharing of information and overcoming entrenched, inefficient hierarchies (Fletcher 1999, Heeks 1999, Chadwick and May 2001, p. 12; for examples of this reasoning in New Zealand governmental literature, see SSC 2001b, pp. 16-8 and SSC 2001c, pp. 20-2).

The managerial approach to e-government draws heavily on theories of public management based in neo-liberal economic approaches to politics. In adopting this commercial model of public management, New Zealand was influenced by similar British and American bureaucratic reforms of the early 1980s (Boston 1991). The economic approach of the 'new public management' has been a powerful influence over New Zealand's public sector since the reforms of the 1980s and 90s. This approach is concerned primarily to eradicate what is seen as the natural inefficiency of public bureaucracies, by means of exposure to competition between government and the private sector, between individual departments, and within departments (Peters 1996 chapter 2, Perri 6 and Kendall 1997, pp. 1-4). The relationship between government and bureaucracy was thus made into a contractual one, based on a commercial model, with the Government 'purchasing' from the bureaucracy the 'outputs' necessary to achieve

particular outcomes (SSC 1996, pp. 9-10, 14, 24-5). The focus of this process was on making all governmental functions 'open' and accountable, so avoiding inefficiencies caused by constant political interference and a lack of incentives to produce efficient outcomes (Peters 1996, pp. 43-6, Bale and Dale 1998, pp. 104-8, 115). The targets of any bureaucratic action are therefore to be clearly and specifically defined, in such a way as to allow easy measurement and evaluation. So, there is great care taken in the implementation plan of the portal strategy (SSC 2001c, pp. 31-8) to provide metrics for the measurement of performance and the assessment of the 'deliverables' of e-government.

The influence of the British and American management approaches can be seen throughout New Zealand's e-government literature, particularly in an increasing focus on efficiency as a primary consideration of e-government, and in a general adoption of commercial language, concepts and goals such as 'customer service' and 'corporate branding'. So, the 'high-level implementation plan' of the portal strategy claims that "the long term success of the portal depends on establishing a viable business model that can justify the investment in advanced technologies and support infrastructure and their future management" (SSC 2001c, p. 10). Similarly, while the Government claims that "the goal of the portal is not to save money", this statement is immediately followed by the point (no doubt attractive to public managers aiming for lower costs and more efficient processes - see Heeks 1999) that "it is inevitable over time that the physical channels and call centres may be scaled back as increasing numbers of customers assist themselves via the portal. Integrated and shared services should lead to significant economies of scale over time" (SSC 2001b, p. 18). The influence of corporate management goals such as positive branding can also be seen in the government literature. For example, the portal strategy overview states that "the New Zealand Government Portal will be strongly and appropriately branded to ensure that every New Zealander can take pride in their government's portal. Agencies may brand their own portals as they wish, but will have to carry a representation of the government brand" (SSC 2001b, p. 23). In general, the Government rates the following objectives the most important:

**Better services** – more convenient and reliable, with lower compliance costs, higher quality and value;

**Cost effectiveness and efficiency** – cheaper, better information and services for customers and better value for taxpayers

**Improved reputation** – building an image of New Zealand as a modern nation, an attractive location for people and business

**Greater participation by people in government** – making it easier for those who wish to contribute; and

**Leadership** – supporting the knowledge society through public sector innovation. (SSC 2001a, p. 6)

As can be seen, there are thus a number of reasons ICT is attractive to public managers aside from efficiency considerations, particularly the value of ICT as a control and monitoring mechanism and its applications in the processing and manipulation of data and other planning processes (see Heeks 1999). The importance given in the new public management to openness and accountability in government operations also helps to explain the attractiveness of ICT for government (see Hjortdal and Shou 1996). ICT provides a cheap and efficient means of publishing information in a form accessible to the public, so meeting the accountability requirements of the contractual relationships. For example, Trevor Mallard (2000a, p. 4) argued that “new technologies will enable easier access to information about government and enable commitments on information disclosure to be met”, while the Minister for Information technology, Paul Swain, suggested that “e-government will mean a more transparent political system because of easier access to government for citizens” (Swain 2000b, p. 2). Similarly, the National Government’s vision statement argued that:

**E-Government:**

**Will offer more open government**

People will find it easier to discover and access the government information that they think is important to them. Better information will take the puzzle out of dealing with government. (SSC 1999, vision, p. 1)

The managerial approach to e-government adopted by the New Zealand Government thus has important implications not only for the provision of government services online, but also for the provision of governmental information. The information-related improvements expected for the operations of government itself are also linked to improvements in the relationship between government and its citizens: “better information will take the puzzle out of dealing with government”. At this point it is,

however, unclear how exactly 'more open government' is intended to result, or exactly what benefits this will have. What sorts of information will be available, or how this information will improve people's experience of government, are also not fully specified in the government literature. Information to be made available online is likely to be "all information currently printed for public dissemination", and new innovations such as land, health, and arts and culture information being made available (SSC 1999, p. 4). How this sort of information will improve the operation of the political system is not discussed. Rather, the argument seems to largely rest on the unspoken assumption that more information made available about government will have beneficial effects for the entire political system.

Expectations, such as those exhibited by much of the e-government literature, that the provision of online governmental information will lead to more and better public involvement in politics are ultimately based on a number of assumptions: about human behaviour and interests, about the roles of information and politics in society, and about the nature and uses of technology. In the various plans and scenarios that have been developed by government, people are portrayed as responding in certain ways to the options presented to them<sup>36</sup>. In these examples, people are expected to continue to pursue information upon which to make decisions until the costs of doing so outweigh the benefits to decision-making that would be gained. Since information is a 'good' in this sense, it is argued that the most effective way to improve public awareness and decision-making is to reduce the barriers to accessing information; doing so will enable people to pursue more information more effectively (Ferejohn 1990, Lamb 1996). As we have seen, this argument has been enthusiastically followed by those pressing for the development of ICT programmes in government for the purposes of civic education and improving public political awareness.

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<sup>36</sup> For example, see the Government's scenarios of everyday e-government use in SSC 1999, introduction, p. 1, SSC 2000 pp. 1-2, and SSC 2001b, pp. 9-11.



The Government's optimistic view of the potential of online information in politics is tied to a more general belief in the potential of information technology itself as a solution to political problems. For example, the e-government strategy document states that:

Modern human history is a story of technological innovation – the motor car, the aeroplane, television and radio, the telephone, and the computer. These innovations were not accompanied by active government policies – they just happened ... Sometimes the state has an active role; more often it is a bystander...

The New Zealand Government intends to be among the governments which actively manage e-technology to make life better for its people. (SSC 2001a, p. 4)

Aside from the highly questionable truth of this position with regard to the passive role of governments in the technological innovations of the last hundred years or so, the willingness of the Government to embrace the new information and communications technologies is notable. Indeed, the operational vision of the new strategy is that "New Zealand will be a world leader in e-government", with the mission that "by 2004 the Internet will be the dominant means of enabling ready access to government information, services and processes" (SSC 2001a, pp. 1, 5-6). These statements, and others like them, suggest a high degree of optimism within the Government about the value of the new technologies. The Government frequently demonstrates a belief in the ability of technology to overcome long-standing issues of governance. The argument appears to be that there is a fundamental, global 'revolution' taking place in government, in line with the wider societal 'information revolution', and that this revolution is directly attributable to the rise of ICT. As a result, as is generally the case in literature of this sort, 'e-government' is presented as a necessary and inevitable step in the future development of governance, in line with prior technological developments. So, Paul Swain (2000c pp. 2) states that "e-government is important because the very nature of the latest generations of technology literally demand a new way of doing things... Government must take advantage of both the risks and opportunities presented<sup>37</sup>."

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<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Helen Clark (Clark and Mallard 2001, p. 2) states that e-government is "worth doing ... because seizing the opportunities of e-government is central to ensuring that New Zealanders get the type of government that we know they will want, and demand, in the future."

For all the Government's optimism about the value of ICT in the provision of governmental information and services, there are a number of difficulties with the managerial approach that it increasingly appears to adopt. These issues, particularly with regard to matters of information and political interest and knowledge of political issues, will be examined in the following sections of the chapter.

## **2. The Limits of the Managerial Approach to Online Government: Public Involvement, Government Authority and the Value of Online Governmental Information**

The provision of online information and services are the key components of the New Zealand Government's e-government programme, as indeed they are in most international programmes. As we have seen, the information processing and transmission power of advanced ICTs, together with new access opportunities created by the development of the Internet and the proliferation of personal computers, have generated considerable excitement, both in and outside of government, with regard to the potential of these technologies in politics. However, for all this enthusiasm, there are a number of weaknesses with the approach adopted by the New Zealand Government, and there is reason to doubt that the practical experience of the governmental provision of online information will live up to the expectations of technology enthusiasts.

To begin with, there remain questions regarding the seriousness of the Government's commitment to encouraging the development of a politically informed public. As noted earlier in the chapter, New Zealand's e-government literature has been quite unclear as to how information would be used, what sorts of information will be made available, and the exact purposes of that information in terms of encouraging the development of a politically informed society. Government documents on e-government have increasingly focused on the provision of information about government services, and of the services themselves, as opposed to political information aimed at encouraging political involvement and awareness. The provision of governmental services online is a

potentially valuable means of improving the equality of public ease of access to services, by enabling the better targeting of services to meet the individual needs of the public. However, as a means of encouraging public political involvement and awareness, online governmental services provision alone is likely to be of very limited value. The increasing prevalence in the e-government literature of management concepts and terminology, combined with an increasing focus on the possibilities of ICT as a tool for promoting efficiency in government service provision, is thus not encouraging in this regard.

However, even to the extent that the Government does believe that the provision of governmental information online will contribute to the development of a politically informed public, there are reservations about the effectiveness of the approach being taken. Web pages can provide a wide range of specific information, but often the information actually provided on individual government web pages is relatively basic, highly specific and/or poorly presented. Often the portal sites are little more than a collection of links to other government sites, organised in directory form (Chadwick and May 2001, p. 17). In this form, portal sites may make access to existing government information and services somewhat less confusing, but often the usefulness of the information itself remains unchanged. Moreover, the limited scope of many governmental online information projects mean that they may be of limited value in encouraging the development of an informed public. As Hale et al. (1998) found, in local-level governmental ICT projects in particular, the quality, range and presentation of online content varies widely. As they note, while there are some excellent sites that “provide the user with rich information on virtually every type of city and civic information imaginable..., many sites are so small and elementary that they are in reality nothing more than a type-written page electronically presented.” (Hale et al. 1998, p. 108). Here again, despite frequent claims about the importance of online information for the future of the political process, it is questionable whether many ICT projects provide information of sufficient depth or value to provide the expected benefits.

The New Zealand Government hopes that it can 're-connect' with its citizens by providing better, more convenient access through ICT to government information and services<sup>38</sup>. However, while the Government may be able to provide vast quantities of useful political information through ICT, this is unlikely to lead to widespread increases in political awareness or involvement. As Bruce Bimber (1998, p. 135), has noted, the central theoretical problem in this approach is the "absence of a clear link between increases in information and increases in popular political action." Public participation in politics has declined rapidly in most Western democratic nations over the last fifty years, despite an even more rapid rise in the availability of information in all forms (see Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, pp. 1-5, Vowles et al. 1993 pp. 41-4, Carlsson 1995, Bimber 1998). Similarly, for the most part levels of public political knowledge and sophistication have failed to show signs of increasing, despite the increasing availability of political information<sup>39</sup>.

Studies of political involvement have unsurprisingly suggested that those most likely to participate are those both knowledgeable about political issues and interested enough to maintain and extend that knowledge (for example, Verba et al. 1978, pp. 292-3, Di Luca 1995, Vowles et al. 1995, pp. 141-7). For this reason, those in the best position to make use of government information provided online are in fact likely to be those already interested in and knowledgeable about political issues, and thus already informed and involved (Neill 1995). In contrast, those with already lower levels of political knowledge and interest are less likely to seek out political information online (Arterton 1989, Van Tassel 1996). This is particularly true since those least interested and involved in politics are most often those at the lower end of the socio-economic scale, and are thus those already likely to face significant barriers to regular access to online political information

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<sup>38</sup> For example, in Labour's 2000 e-government vision statement it states that "the e-government vision will play an important part" in achieving the goal of "restoring trust in government and providing strong social services", because it will "strengthen the relationship between people and the state through greater opportunities for participation" (SSC 2000, p. 4).

<sup>39</sup> There is some debate about the question of the level of the public's political knowledge, and about the importance of public knowledge of current political information. However, most researchers agree that public political knowledge has not improved significantly in the last 50 years, despite the emergence of the mass media. See Verba et al. 1978, Ferejohn 1990, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Graber 1994, Bimber 1998.

(Verba et al. 1978, pp. 122-4, 134-45, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, pp. 5-13, 45-50, and Vowles et al. 1995, pp. 47-9, 137-9).

To the extent that Government expects that low levels of public political involvement and awareness can be solved by the provision of more and better information by technological means, it overlooks the difficulty of encouraging widespread interest in politics, and of ensuring that a sufficient degree of political knowledge exists across the public as a whole. As noted by Virnoche and Marx (1997), this 'build it and they will come' approach to the technological provision of information has hampered numerous ICT projects, largely because it oversimplifies the relationship between public political participation and access to information and services (see also Abramson et al. 1988, Arterton 1989, Tsagarousianou 1998a). With the information transmission and processing power of ICT so frequently touted as a solution to almost any economic, social or political problem, the importance of practical knowledge and interest in making use of that information is too easily overlooked. Attempts to increase political participation and awareness, particularly among those groups that tend to be lacking in these areas, therefore need to consider how to best encourage knowledge of and interest in political issues.

If political involvement is associated with reasonably high degrees of knowledge and interest in politics, how then to best encourage these characteristics across the public as a whole? The Government appears to hope that this can primarily be achieved largely by the more convenient provision of online, unmediated political information. As Chadwick and May (2001, pp. 12-4, see also pp. 16-27) note, the 'managerial' model of ICT use adopted by most central governments "treats information as relatively simple and unilinear rather than complex and discursively generated. Information can be 'delivered' and will empower those previously unable to access it. The state is regarded as the authoritative source of information in society." Governmental attempts to develop portal sites into single, 'authoritative' sources for information, so bypassing independent intermediaries, may potentially pose a threat to the ability of the media and the public in general to act as checks on government power. Since information is delivered in a top-

down, government-led manner, government retains, or may potentially increase, control the meanings of that information and the political agenda as a whole. As Hale et al. (1998, p. 98) argue, “this emphasis on the role of information is elitist, in that the traditional definition of ‘well-informed’ is to have the knowledge base of the governing elite.” Governmental information is provided in the name of ‘openness’ and accountability, and as a means of legitimising government activities. However, the difficulties citizens, and even the media, are likely to face in contextualizing that information independent of government authority under the management model may limit the value of online governmental information in promoting effective public involvement in politics.

E-government programmes appear unlikely to meet the high expectations of technology enthusiasts in encouraging political awareness and involvement by means of online information provision alone, unless accompanied by broader attempts to increase public interest in and knowledge of political issues (see Blumler 1997, Hagen 1997). The Government’s managerial focus on information and service and reliance on technological solutions to political problems is thus not encouraging. Where information is provided in a top-down, managerial approach, opportunities for citizen input, contestation and political involvement are limited. This line of reasoning suggests an alternative approach, one that takes into account the social circumstances of political interest and involvement and the limitations of a reliance on technology. The final section of this chapter will further investigate the implications of the managerial focus on information and technology, and discuss alternative approaches to online political awareness and involvement that attempt to develop a broader, knowledge-based conception of political involvement.

### **3. Information and Knowledge in Politics: Implications for ICT and Political Participation**

What is information, and what is its value in promoting political involvement? These may seem like questions with obvious answers, but they are nonetheless important. Information is most commonly associated with knowledge, yet alone it is not knowledge (European Commission 1997, Brown and Duguid 2000, chapter 5, Holly and Herman 2001, pp. 37-8). Knowledge is perhaps best described as the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject, whereas information is rather an accumulation of facts, data, details, intelligence or advice (see Hagen 1997, pp. 405-6 and Mulder 1999, pp. 193-4). Moreover, knowledge is far more than the mere accumulation of information; it requires the processing of many pieces of information into a reasonably coherent framework of understanding (Lakoff 1995, Brown and Duguid 2000, chapter 5). It is after all knowledge, rather than information, that is usually equated with power, and for good reason. The power to make correct decisions depends on the possession of good quality information, to be sure, but that information is useless unless it is received by someone interested enough to be able to identify its value, and possessing the knowledge necessary to make the most effective use of it (Neill 1995).

It is not without reason that we have 'information technology' rather than 'knowledge technology'; information is far more suitable for quick and convenient transmission by means of computer or other such technology. Thus, the communication and dispersion of information is a fairly simple matter in modern technologically advanced society, while the communication and dispersion of knowledge remains frustratingly difficult. As Brown and Duguid (2000, chapters 1, 3, 5, see also European Commission 1997) have noted, whereas information is in a sense independent and thus suitable for transmission and distribution, knowledge instead implies the existence of a 'knower', and is therefore not easily detached, moved, recorded, etc. The transferral or sharing of knowledge thus requires practical experience, communication and shared understanding, rather than the mere accumulation and transmission of facts (Neill 1995, Brown and Duguid 2000, chapter 5).

Attempts at the sharing of knowledge (i.e. education) are therefore most effective when the learner shares an interest in the subject, and recognises the value of what is being taught. Without such interest and recognition, the information being imparted is likely to be ignored or discarded (see Ferejohn 1990, pp. 10-12, Graber 1994). Knowledge and interest are therefore inter-linked; few people acquire knowledge of a subject in which they have no interest, while gaining knowledge in a subject often also leads to the development of further interest. Moreover, learning is a social process, involving communication and interaction between people, rather than the mere transmission of information; social groups provide the resources for motivation to learn by encouragement and the development of shared interests and understandings (Neill 1995, Talbott 1995, chapter 17, Brown and Duguid 2000, chapter 5). Attempts at public education, in politics or ICT use, therefore appear likely to fail if they depend entirely on the transmission of information alone, rather than the encouragement of communication, practical involvement and shared learning (Neill 1995, European Commission 1997).

In its focus on technologically-created potentials for massive increases in unmediated information transmission, the Government seems to confuse information with knowledge, or assumes that one leads directly to the other. Yet the above arguments suggest that political information is only likely to be valuable and useful to those who find politics interesting, and who possess the background framework of understanding necessary to effectively process each new piece of information (see also Ferejohn 1990, pp. 11-12, Krampen 1991, Bimber 1998). Moreover, theories of 'information overload' are now well established, arguing that too much information is already produced to be useful; the time, energy, knowledge and interest required to filter and process information in the electronic age are beyond most people (see for example Roszak 1986, Lakoff 1995, Carlsson 1995, Talbott 1995). In this situation, the provision of more information alone is unlikely to be particularly helpful. Given that the Internet is a 'pull' rather than 'push' technology, requiring citizens to actively seek out information rather than passively receiving it, the effectiveness of merely increasing the quality and quantity of information available is likely to be further reduced. As Coleman notes:



Unless users can not only become informed, but become aware of what they need to know in order to be informed, the 'information revolution' may well empower the already knowledgeable at the expense of leaving the less informed even more confused. (Coleman 1999b, p. 16)

The Government's focus on information as a means of facilitating service-based interactions with government itself ignores other important motivations for public interest in political information. People also seek out political news and information out of a sense of civic obligation or belonging, for entertainment, or to aid their interactions in family or social groups (Graber 1984, Burn and Konrad 1987, Vowles et al. 1995, pp. 142-7, Hacker 1996, Hagen 1997). Moreover, one of the most important reasons that people are motivated to access political information is as a means of aiding communication and participation in the political process (Dutton 1999, chapter 4, Budge 1996, Hale et al. 1998, Chadwick and May 2001, pp. 14-6). So, those most interested in politics are not only more likely to access political information, but also to participate at all levels of the political process (Verba et al. 1978, pp. 136-40, 290-5, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, pp. 1-10, and Vowles et al. 1995, p. 144-6). In Roberta Lamb's words, "informed citizens want access to political power ... [they] want to interact with representatives of power, and they want information about the effectiveness of that interaction" (Lamb 1996, p. 23). This has indeed been the experience in some cases; as Elizabeth Richard (1999, p. 74) states in reference to the experience of the Canadian government, "whilst the ... federal government strategy was primarily to disseminate information through the Internet, expectations from the public forced the federal government to think of their Internet presence as a tool for two-way communication with citizens."<sup>40</sup>

Public expectations for online information as a tool in political participation are based on what Lamb (1996) calls the 'informational contexts' of the public's ICT use. These 'informational contexts' are the contextual reasons why people find information valuable and useful, based in the social world in which people live and work (see also European Commission 1997). As discussed in the case of the sharing of knowledge, new

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<sup>40</sup> For discussion of similar experiences with regard to Santa Monica's PEN, see Lamb (1996 p. 18).

information is only valuable to the extent that it fulfils a social need or interest. As many scholars have argued, political information is therefore most useful where it can be put to practical use in the context of interpersonal interaction in a political setting, in building a sense of belonging and community, and as a means of meaningfully engaging in the political process (see for example Arterton 1987, Ferejohn 1990, pp. 12-14, Putnam 1993, Graber 1994). As Hagen's study of those accessing political news suggests, while many citizens may access political information out of a sense of civic obligation or desire to belong, unless that information is 'socially useful' they are likely to find the experience of doing so somewhat frustrating and unrewarding (Hagen 1997, pp. 407-13: see also Hacker 1996, Bimber 1998). Similarly, Brown and Duguid (2000, pp. 128-46) argue for a distinction between learning *about* something (which may be achieved through access to information) and learning *to be*, which requires practical experience based on participation.

The development of an active, involved public, in which people learn *to be* active, involved political citizens rather than merely become more informed about the workings of their government, thus requires widespread, interpersonal and practical public participation in political issues. Political information alone may thus be of limited value unless it is provided in the context of "a public sphere [that] is not only a set of social institutions..., but also a place for sense-making, meaning generation and possible engagement in political life" (Hagen p. 413; see also Putnam 1993, Lamb 1996 pp. 29-33, Bimber 1998). If the Government is serious about encouraging political involvement and awareness, it must also consider the importance of providing avenues by which that information can be put to use in a practical sense; that is, in some form of interactive political participation. As we have already seen, the Government has indicated that e-government will also have important implications for political participation; this subject will be explored at length in a later chapter.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Technological solutions to social, political and economic problems have long been attractive to governments. New Zealand governments, both local and central, have focused to a large degree on the properties of the Internet in the inexpensive publishing of online information and in the provision of online services. However, the quality and usefulness of governmental information provided has varied greatly at both levels, and online governmental services are unlikely to significantly improve public political involvement. While there are some examples of good attempts, both local and central governmental information has often suffered by being overly technical or specific, or limited in scope and detail. Moreover, this chapter has suggested that, despite rhetoric to the contrary, the governmental focus on the technologically-enabled provision of information may face serious difficulties in encouraging the development of a politically informed and engaged society.

The governmental technology-, service- and information-based approach to problems of political participation and involvement overlooks the limitations of these tools in overcoming problems of low public political interest and knowledge. Despite the prevalence of enthusiastic claims regarding the 'democratic' nature of online networks, the managerial approach to e-government generally adopted by major governments is one that concentrates primarily on the provision of online information and services in a limited, hierarchical manner. This approach thus remains focused on the improvement (primarily in terms of economic efficiency) of existing government processes, rather than providing opportunities for public input and involvement. Yet there are strong arguments that online political information alone is likely to be of limited use as a means of encouraging public political involvement and awareness, particularly where online information provision is not accompanied by the development of more and better avenues for meaningful participation in political society. The following chapter will therefore investigate major governmental attempts to go beyond the hierarchical provision of online information and services, by using ICT as a tool for the encouraging of public political participation.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE CONSULTATIVE APPROACH TO ONLINE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT: ACCESS, SERVICE, AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Information and communications technologies have long been associated with democratic processes. Moreover, many commentators have seen in the recent widening of the communications potential of these technologies the seeds of democratic rebirth. A great deal of the enthusiasm for ICT in discussions of online politics and government has been driven by expectations regarding the communicative, as opposed to merely informational, capabilities of ICT. Advanced ICTs allow virtually instantaneous two-way communication between people separated by vast distances, so seemingly overcoming long-standing barriers to more active and widespread political participation by the public as a whole. Many commentators now believe that the Internet is likely to create numerous new opportunities for democratic public participation in political systems. Governments themselves appear to have been influenced by these claims, making frequent use of the language and concepts of online democracy and initiating a number of ICT projects incorporating mechanisms aimed at providing avenues for public participation in government.

This chapter will examine the approaches governments have taken to encouraging online access to government policy-making. Part one of the chapter will briefly discuss the literature of online democracy, and international governmental projects that have drawn on this literature in the establishing ICT projects that attempt to facilitate greater public participation in government and politics. Part two will explore in detail the approach taken to these issues in New Zealand, particularly in the Government's e-government

programme. Part three will explore the governmental model of online access to government policy-making, particularly the influence of managerial approaches to government, and will discuss the implications of this model for patterns of political organisation and participation.

## **II. ACCESS AND ONLINE PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT: THEORY AND PRACTICE**

### **1. Participatory Theory, Access and Online Political Participation**

Hopes for an ICT-enabled popular democratic revival have drawn heavily on participatory theories of democratic politics. Models of democracy that encourage broad public participation in politics have a long history, dating back to the popular civic assemblies in Athens and other Ancient Greek city-states. The last fifty years in particular have seen a revival of support for participatory forms of democratic theory. Two major strands of participatory democratic theory have come to prominence in recent years: the plebiscitary approach, often described as aggregative, which focuses on the widespread use of referenda and opinion polling in public decision making; and the deliberative approach, which calls for the expansion and improvement of the space of the 'public (or political) sphere' of civil society and a focus on considered, egalitarian public discussion and debate in decision-making processes (London 1995, Friedland 1996). Theories of both plebiscitary and deliberative forms of participatory democracy have blossomed in recent decades, and now cover an enormous amount of theoretical ground. A review of this multitude of approaches is far beyond the scope of this thesis, though there will be further discussion later in the chapter. It is important to note here, however, is that out of each of these two major strands have developed related approaches to encouraging participatory democratic processes online, the first of which will be examined in this chapter. The liberal, plebiscitary, 'teledemocratic' strand of these theories has been the

more influential of these strands in recent years, particularly in terms of influencing government practice<sup>41</sup>.

The rise in prominence of participatory theories of democracy is in large part due to two factors: rapid developments in information and communications technologies over the last century; and, perhaps more importantly, the well-documented decline in levels of political participation across most Western democracies since World War Two, a perceived problem that some feel these technologies may be able to remedy (London 1995, p. 34). As the technologies have developed, participatory theories of democracy have increasingly focused on technology as a solution to this problem. These theories argue that new communications technologies have removed the barriers of time, distance and expense that in the past necessarily constrained widespread public participation in political decision-making in large states (see for example Grossman 1995, Budge 1996, Hughes 1996, TAN+N2 1998, section 1).

Teledemocratic theories of online politics focus on the ability of ICT to encourage greater citizen participation in government processes. Specific proposals vary widely, but in general they call for the introduction of mechanisms allowing greater public contact with representatives, including extensive use of ICT-enabled voting mechanisms such as referenda and opinion polling in major political decisions, backed by increases in the amount of unmediated political information available (for examples of various approaches, see Abramson et al. 1988, Hughes 1996, p. 3, TAN+N2 1998, sections 1-3 and Dutton 1999, pp. 85-6 and chapter 7). It is argued that increasing popular influence in political decision-making, through encouraging the communication of popular opinion to government, will address long-standing inequalities in political power, and will encourage the development of a public that is more actively interested and involved in political issues (TAN+N2 1998, section 1, Budge 1996). The development of the Internet in particular has given new cause for hope for many adherents of teledemocracy, due to

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<sup>41</sup> Deliberative theories of online government, and governmental ICT projects drawing on these theories, will be explored in the following chapter

its flexibility, power and already widespread accessibility (Dutton 1999, chapter 7, Grossman 1995).

## 2. Access and Political Participation in Online Governmental ICT Projects

A key concern in most governmental ICT projects, both at the local and central levels, has been the importance of ensuring equal access to online government. Most commonly, this has been approached by attempting to ensure encourage equal access to the technologies themselves. Apart from the establishment of Internet web sites, governmental attempts to achieve more widespread and equal access to online government information and services have most commonly centred around providing dedicated public ICT centres or kiosks, providing Internet access in schools, health centres, post offices, libraries and other public buildings, introducing technology grant programmes and encouraging ICT uptake across the general public (Docter and Dutton 1998, Dutton 1999 chapter 7, Milner 1999, Lax 2001, Wilhelm 2001). For example:

It will become important that the public has access to multimedia and on-line services regardless of their location and personal circumstances ... public access points to networks and equipment capable of handling multimedia applications could be established in libraries, community centres and other public buildings. (DTI Multimedia Industry Advisory Group Report, quoted in Select Committee on Science and Technology 1996, p. 5. See also the British Cabinet White Paper, *Modernising Government* 1999, [Cabinet Office 1999] and the UK Online Strategy [Office of the E-Envoy 2000])

Central governmental examples include Singapore's SingaporeONE programme, C-SPAN, which brings live coverage of Congress to half of the homes in the US, the American Ask Congress multimedia kiosks, the E-Rate programme to bring ICT into US schools, and similar programmes in the UK outlined in *Modernising Government* (Cabinet Office 1999, see also European Commission 1997, Dutton 1999, Boyle 2000). Among the numerous local government and community initiatives are the high-profile PEN project in Santa Monica (see Van Tassel 1996, Docter and Dutton 1998), Minnesota's E-Democracy project (see Dahlberg 2000), the Australian Victoria state government's Maxi programme of one-stop-shop service kiosks (see Boyle 2000), and a

number of European initiatives such as Manchester's Information City (see Bryan 1998), Network Pericles in Greece (see Tsagarousianou 1998b) and Bologne's IperBoIE network (see Tambini 1998)<sup>42</sup>.

As issues regarding equal access to ICTs are gradually overcome, many analysts further expect that the development of online forms of political participation will have important benefits for the political system as a whole. Most commonly, these arguments take the position that cyberspace creates new possibilities for organisational involvement in politics, allowing the formation of new political groupings and increased political participation (Abramson et al. 1988, pp. 126-37, Schickler 1994). The new communications technologies allow the overcoming of many traditional barriers to communication and organisation. This may allow political parties and organisations the means to revive their popularity and reinvigorate participation in political life<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, those previously under-represented and alienated from the political system may be able to act and to voice their concerns more effectively as a result of the reduced costs and increased speed of communication and publishing<sup>44</sup>. With the greater involvement of a more diverse range of political groupings, it is hoped that politics will be more representative of society and the quality of decisions thus improved. At the local level in particular, it is often argued that ICT can be used to encourage local-level political participation and involvement, by facilitating organisation and communication between the concerned citizens of an area, to solve local-level problems and build community relations, independent of established political organisations and government

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<sup>42</sup> For further examples of recent local-level projects, see Friedland (1996), Virnoche and Marx (1997), Dutton (1999), especially chapters 4 and 7, and Wilhelm (2000).

<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of how political parties may make use of ICT, see Budge (1996) and Nixon and Johansson (1999).

<sup>44</sup> This has been a particularly popular claim about the value of ICT for politics, and is employed in a variety of these types of discussions. See for example Schickler (1984, pp. 181-4), Schwartz (1996), Rash (1997), Nixon and Johansson (1999), Locke (1999), Moore (1999), Evans (2000).



(see for example Tehranian 1990, Friedland 1996, Rash 1997, Hague and Loader 1999, Locke 1999 and Ray 1999, pp. 319-22).

By encouraging the creation of new identities based around interest, personal expression and equality, it is often argued that cyberspace effectively combats the traditional, hierarchical identities promoted by the mass media, political organisations and governments (Cerulo and Ruane 1998, Jordan 1999). Organisational recruitment and mobilisation will be made considerably easier, thus removing some of the obstacles faced by oppositional political groups, particularly those traditionally lacking in resources (Abramson et al. 1988, chapter 4, Schwartz 1996, Rash 1997, Calhoun 1998 and De Vaney 2000). Indeed, there has already been considerable evidence of the effective use of ICT to organise and draw attention to their cause by high-profile political groups ranging from the Zapitistas, to Greenpeace, to the G8 protestors, to the U'wa indigenous group, among others, as well as most established political parties (De Vaney 2000. See also Abramson 1988, chapter 4, Tehranian 1990, chapter 5, Kurland and Egan 1996, Calhoun 1998, Escobar 1999). Certainly, vast numbers of political organisations are now exploring ICT as a means of networking and organising, reaching new people, and promoting their cause free of the restrictions of mainstream media filtering.

While governments have generally focused primarily on the provision of political information and services online, most governments have also made some efforts at providing mechanisms for increasing public access to and participation in politics. Moreover, many commentators expect that as the Internet develops and citizens grow accustomed to the egalitarian nature of the technologies, pressure will grow on governments to make provision for online citizen participation in politics (for example, Grossman 1995). Klaus Lenk states this position succinctly:

As a counterweight to one-sided administrative reforms that promoted efficiency and effectiveness at the expense of democratic participation... we can soon expect a cultural change in favour of providing more information to citizens beyond their consumer roles, in order to help them to participate in public affairs. (Lenk 1999, p. 89)

The technologies used in providing access to online governmental consultations have varied. By far the most common consultative tool is the provision of e-mail access to government (Hague and Loader 1999, Hale et al. 1999). However, many projects have used more ambitious consultative techniques such as allowing citizen input via e-mail or online forms on electronically published policy proposals, or introducing live, interactive televised or web-cast debates with politicians and officials (Bryan et al. 1998, Coleman 1999a, Hale et al. 1999). Voters in the March 2000 Arizona State Presidential Primary Election also had the opportunity to cast their vote on the Internet, providing an alternative and more convenient means of access to elections.

Local governments have led the way in making use of participatory mechanisms in recent ICT projects (Friedland 1996). Initially, civic networks were small-scale and largely 'closed', limited to those living in an area able to gain physical access to a (often publicly provided) terminal connected to the network. The development of personal computers and the World Wide Web has broadened the scope of participatory networks considerably, allowing anyone in the area (or the world) with access to the Internet to gain access to a network. In recent years, particularly since the advent of the Internet, many local governments around the world have followed the example of the multitude of non-governmental community-based participatory networks and have established online governmental civic networks. A number of these local governmental ICT projects have included plebiscitary initiatives, building on the largely non-governmental 'televote' experiments conducted in Hawaii, New Zealand and elsewhere (see Slaton 1992, and also Arterton 1987, Schickler 1994 and Dutton 1999, pp. 81-2, 179-83). The most prominent of the early local ICT experiments was the QUBE interactive cable network in Columbus, Ohio, which featured electronic polling of the public during town meetings, along with similar initiatives in American cities such as Washington and Des Moines (Tsagarousianou 1998a, Dutton 1999). More recent local networks featuring plebiscitary functions such as public referenda on policy issues include Network Pericles in Greece and Amsterdam's City Talks and City Consultations projects (see Brants et al. 1996, Tsagarousianou 1998b, Francissen and Brants 1999). However, while there have been examples of the governmental use of online plebiscitary mechanisms, consultative

experiments in electronic political participation at the local level have generally focused on encouraging other forms of communication between citizens and government.

Central governments have been considerably slower to warm to the participatory applications of ICT than local governments (Milner 1999, Richard 1999). Of course, for some years governments have made increasing use of surveys and opinion polling, the use of which has increased markedly since the rise of television and the mass media (Blumler 1997). Nonetheless, until recently central governments have not tended to encourage online forms of direct public participation in policy-making. As noted in the previous chapter, most central governmental ICT policy documents and projects have focused on the provision of governmental information and services in a 'managerial' model of e-government. The focus of the managerial model is on improving customer service, access to information and the bottom-line efficiency of government operations, rather than creating opportunities for public involvement in decision-making. Central governmental attempts at online public consultation have thus been limited, and to a large extent reliant on the initiative of individual politicians or agencies (Plotz 1999).

Most central governmental web sites have failed to facilitate public contacts with government, beyond providing e-mail contact to politicians and officials (Taylor and Burt 1999, Plotz 1999, Hague and Loader 1999, pp. 12-3, and see Richard 1999, Milner 1999, Coleman 1999 and Dutton 1999, pp. 184-8). While many governmental web sites now provide a selection of policy documents online, it remains relatively rare for online public input on specific policies to be requested. Instead, most governmental sites have concentrated on the provision of information with regard to how the citizen might participate in established policy-making procedures (Taylor and Burt 1999, pp. 147-9). However, many governmental sites do now provide for public feedback in a 'suggestion box' format, allowing easy and convenient public comment on general issues by means of electronic forms. Moreover, recent policy pronouncements from some governments have shown a growing interest in the possibilities of ICT in facilitating citizen involvement in policy-making. For example, the 2001 UK Online annual report states that:

Providing efficient services online is key priority, but e-Government should not stop there. An e-Government should also use new technologies to enhance citizens' opportunities to participate in the democratic process and enable Government to seek the views, knowledge and experiences of people. People should not only be able to conduct online transactions with Government, but also be:

- consulted online on Government policies;
- offered the opportunity to have an online dialogue with Government and fellow citizens on issues of common concern; and
- given the opportunity to vote by electronic means in elections and other ballots under statutory control. (Office of the E-Envoy 2001, section 5)

The above passage is an excellent example of the new attention being paid in government to the possibility of online democratic participation in politics. The 2001 UK Online Annual Report clearly builds on similar ideas already expressed in other UK governmental documents. For example, the Central Information Technology Unit's 2000 paper, *E-Government*, stated that e-government will lead to "greater democratic participation and openness" (CITU 2000, p. 6), and a "better informed and more participative democracy through electronic consultation and better responses to feedback" (CITU 2000, p. 8). Whether or not other major governments follow this example remains to be seen, particularly as at the time of writing there have been few concrete changes to the operation of e-government in Britain, though any major British initiatives are likely to prove influential. Indeed, as will be seen in the following part of the chapter, there are indications that the New Zealand Government is beginning to adopt a similar approach to online public participation in government.

### **III. ONLINE PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT: THE NEW ZEALAND EXPERIENCE**

#### **1. Online Political Participation in New Zealand: Governmental Initiatives and the Development of the E-Government Programme**

Once again, governmental ICT projects in New Zealand have followed dominant patterns of international governmental practice. Governmental ICT projects have not had the

encouragement of citizen participation in government as a priority. At both local and central governmental levels, opportunities for members of the public to actively participate in government processes online have been rather limited. However, there have recently been signs of growing interest in New Zealand government of the possibilities of online participation. The e-government programme developed by the New Zealand Government has from its beginnings included public participation as a key goal.

At the local level, governments in New Zealand have made only limited use of ICT as a means of encouraging citizen participation. As noted, local government ICT initiatives have predominantly used the Internet, and have focused on the government-to-citizen online provision of information and services. Most local government web sites provide the e-mail address of local councillors and, less frequently, local-level officials, but rarely provide further information as to how and in what circumstances e-mail communication with the public will be useful. Some local councils provide online forms or surveys that request public feedback on certain issues, generally relating to the usefulness of the government web site itself (for example, the Wellington City Council's Website Survey). A small number of local councils provide a selection of policy documents and reports online for public consumption, but attempts to solicit public input on these documents have been very rare, and again the role and benefits of public comments are generally unclear.

The Government of New Zealand has approached ICT in a similar manner to New Zealand local governments. Encouraging direct public participation in politics has until recently not been a major goal of the Government's ICT use. As a means of communicating with the public, the Government has made use of ICT in establishing agency web sites, but these web sites have, as noted in earlier chapters, focused primarily on the provision of government information and services. As at the local level, attempts to encourage communication with members of the public and participation in government have centred around developing public e-mail access to politicians and officials. All New Zealand central governmental web sites now supply the e-mail addresses of relevant politicians and officials, though generally with little or no information with regard to how

such e-mail will be used. A small number of governmental web sites have provided draft policy documents online, inviting opinion from the public via e-mail, as a supplement to normal consultative processes (see for example SSC 2001d). However, thus far, central government has made few unified or systematic moves towards introducing online mechanisms for public consultation on government policy.

While actual governmental ICT practice has not been focused on the potential of these technologies in encouraging political participation, there are signs that this may be changing. From late 1999, with the programme in its infancy, governmental literature began to focus on greater public participation as a key benefit of e-government. The National Government's September 1999 e-government vision statement is particularly striking in its general optimism with regard to the broad potential of ICT, including the value of ICT as a communicative mechanism between government and citizens. The vision statement expects that "online services will be citizen centred" (SSC 1999, p. 4), and states that:

In terms of government, traditionally it could talk to people, and they took what was dished up. People couldn't easily talk back. The essence of e-government, by contrast, is people letting government know what they want. It's talking back to government, and modifying its response to match people's perception of their own unique needs. (SSC 1999, introduction, p.1)

More specifically, the vision statement goes on to suggest that as e-government progresses "the public might expect to see developments along the lines of ... not least, electronic democracy, including online access to legislation, Hansard and to all politicians" (SSC 1999, p. 1). This passage represents perhaps the earliest favourable reference by a New Zealand government to the concept of electronic democracy, and as such is a particularly important reference point in the analysis of the Government's approach to democracy and technology. The key question for our purposes is: what exactly is meant here by 'electronic democracy'? The concept is not defined, a tendency which is repeated in all similar governmental documents, so it is necessary to draw inferences from the specific plans for e-government. Here 'electronic democracy' seems to include access to governmental information, such as legislation and Hansard, as well as "access to all politicians", though the purposes of both types of access with regard to

the actual practical exercise of democracy are not explained. Earlier, the statement had suggested that “the essence of e-government ...is people letting government know what they want”, with government then “modifying its response to match people’s perception of their own unique needs” (SSC 1999, p. 1). Similarly, the vision statement claims that e-government:

**Will make it easy to have your say**

People will be able to make their voice heard more easily. It will uniquely empower, for example, the disadvantaged. Policy-making will involve more continuous and open consultation with New Zealanders. (SSC 1999, p. 4)

ICT is clearly an exciting development in the eyes of the authors, creating remarkable opportunities for government and its citizens, but they do not discuss the practical mechanisms by which consultation, two-way communication and empowerment for the disadvantaged are to be implemented using ICT.

Despite the rhetoric of democratic participation that appears frequently throughout the 1999 e-government vision statement, the document remains largely ambiguous with regard to the specific details of online political participation. While it appears that one of the goals of the e-government programme is to promote something called ‘electronic democracy’, there is no clear governmental framework for establishing what this might mean or how it is to practically be achieved. To a certain extent, this is not surprising, given that the 1999 vision statement is the first major governmental discussion of e-government, and as such only represents the State Services Commission’s initial thinking on these issues. While later governmental documents on e-government have often remained similarly ambiguous, some clearer indications as to the Government’s approach to encouraging the development of online political participation have slowly emerged.

## 2. The Labour Government's Initial Approaches to Online Participation

The Labour Government's May 2000 vision statement, much like the previous version authorised by the National government in 1999, clearly reflects only the initial approach of the SSC and the Government with regard to e-government. As such, it naturally focuses for the most part on the general intentions of the Government, rather than giving very many specific details. Again, however, there are the beginnings of an apparent conflict between actual policy choices and the optimistic rhetoric of technologically enabled participation represented by frequent references, in both Government documents and by individual Ministers, to ideals of democratic participation through ICT.

The key vision of the Labour Government's e-government vision statement is that "New Zealanders will be able to gain access to government information and services, and participate in our democracy, using the Internet, telephones and other technologies as they emerge" (SSC 2000, p. 1). This is in fact the first sentence of the document, and is clearly intended to be fundamentally representative of the Government's position on the political applications of ICT (see Mallard 2000c, pp. 1, 3). The vision statement goes on to state that "the planned development of e-government will improve the ability of all New Zealanders to participate in our democracy" (SSC 2000, p. 1). Specifically, "within five years or so, people should be able to ... have their say on a wide range of government proposals and policies through the Internet" (SSC 2000, p. 3). As in the previous vision statement released under National, it is not made clear as to the specific mechanisms by which online public participation in government will operate, or the purposes and effects of that participation. However, Labour's vision statement does provide the following example of how "e-government will improve government":

*It will be easier for people to have their say in government*

For example, consider a situation where a Ministry proposes to make changes to the way it provides a particular service. It could outline the proposed policy changes on its Internet site and seek comment from people who have something to say about those services, and the proposed new policy. The feedback could then be used to refine that policy" (SSC 2000, p. 1)



This is indeed current practice with regard to online consultation on policy, at least in a relatively small number of cases. However, the practical definition of democratic participation adopted by the vision statement is once again limited to the linear, isolated communication of citizen preferences to government, with no opportunity from broader, multidirectional public debate between citizens and government. Despite the rhetoric, the actual model of online participation adopted by the Labour Government in its vision statement is clearly closest to a limited, government-led, 'consultative' model of online political participation. In the example, political participation is associated with citizens providing feedback to government, particularly on government services. Moreover, the opportunity to participate appears to be largely dependent on the Ministry's initial proposal to make changes to a particular service. The Ministry first outlines the proposed changes and then seeks comment based on that outline; at no point in the example does there appear to be an opportunity for the public to initiate policy debate beyond the terms set by the Ministry. In contrast to those expecting a revolutionary form of online deliberative democracy to develop, based in the interactive, communicative potential of ICT, the Government, perhaps unsurprisingly, focuses on the ability of ICT to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of existing decision-making processes.

Despite this, in the wake of the release of the vision statement the Government continued to promote e-government as a means of significantly advancing democracy in New Zealand. In July 2000, not long after the establishment of the E-Government Unit, Paul Swain said in a speech to the ITANZ that e-government is "... about people using modern technology so that they can have more of a say in how things work. In other words e-government is about the future of democracy" (Swain 2000b, p. 1). In a speech in December 2000, Trevor Mallard made these claims more specific when he suggested that e-government "focuses on people's ability to participate in democracy. This can take a number of forms, from voting in a general election, to accessing legislation online, through to commenting on policies as they are developed" (Mallard 2000a, p. 2). Mallard's comments here are particularly revealing. Chadwick and May (2001, p. 14) have noted that governments have frequently made much of electronic voting and 'continuous democracy' as a means of supplementing and improving established

decision-making processes, and Mallard displays a similar enthusiasm. Moreover, participatory democracy is again depicted as a process of opinion-transmission from citizens to government. Citizens provide limited feedback, or 'comment on policies as they are developed' by government, but are not portrayed engaging in open, reflective deliberation with officials, or other citizens. In this model of political participation, control of the process of political participation, including the definition of the problems and the setting of the agenda, thus remains firmly in the hands of the government and established intermediaries.

Later Government documents have elaborated the Government's position on e-government. Despite continued rhetoric of democratic participation in politics, the Government remains committed to the use of ICT in a consultative form. The following section will explore the Government's major strategy documents of 2001, and their implications for the evolution of democratic processes both online and offline.

### **3. Online Political Participation in the E-Government Strategy and the Draft Portal Strategy Documents**

The major governmental documents on e-government released in 2001 were the e-government strategy document released in April (with an update in December) and the draft portal strategy documents released in June. These documents were developed by the specially-created E-Government Unit, and are considerably more detailed than previous governmental literature on the subject. However, these recent documents continue to display ambiguities and inconsistencies with regard to issues of political participation, particularly when compared to the bold, optimistic tones of general governmental rhetoric on e-democracy. For instance, in his foreword to the strategy document, Trevor Mallard states that:

All round the world e-government is revolutionising our understanding of how government works and the quality of what it can deliver to people...

Creating e-government is a key to our future well-being through its focus on better understanding and meeting individual New Zealander's needs and creating opportunities for greater public participation in government and democratic processes. (SSC 2001a, p. 1)

In contrast to governmental attempts to sell e-government as a revolutionary reform of government processes, in practice the Government remains committed to a restrained model of online government based around management of information and services and limited, ICT-supported public consultations. As noted in the previous chapter, one of the aims of e-government, as defined in the strategy document is:

**Greater participation by people in government** – making it easier for those who wish to contribute. (SSC 2001a, p. 6)

Participation thus remains as a goal of e-government, though stated here in rather weak, ambiguous terms. There is no indication as to where participation will take place, in what forms and on what issues, or the mechanisms by which greater participation will be enabled. E-government will enable 'those who wish to contribute' to do so, but this is a far cry from the images of a politically active, deliberative public envisaged by many supporters of online democracy. The Government's strategy in support of the objective of participation is to:

- Provide multiple channels for contact with government. (SSC 2001a, p. 8)

This strategy will be achieved by the following supporting activities:

- Provide facilities to enable interactive consultation among agencies and between agencies and customers.
- Develop systems to enable the public to offer structured feedback on policy issues. (SSC 2001a, p. 8)

Again, the strategy document here remains ambiguous with regard to the forms that online democratic participation will take. Consultation is to be 'interactive' between government agencies and their 'customers', though there is no further explanation as to what exactly 'interactive consultation' will entail. Moreover, the public is described as offering 'feedback on policy issues'. This, and the suggestion that any public feedback

will be 'structured' again indicates that public participation will likely be issue-based, based on private rather than public consultations between citizens and government, and subject to the initiative of the government agencies themselves in opening policies for consultation. The strategy document may state that e-government will lead to the development of "open and inclusive policy development processes", as "new technologies will allow increased consultation and discussion between government, people and business" (SSC 2001a, p. 11). However, in this model of consultation, control of the agenda and terms of debate will remain in the hands of the Government itself, with the public's contribution to be based on the submitting of isolated opinions within those terms.

For all the Government's indications that the participatory applications of ICT are an important component of e-government, the strategy document contains no reference to specific plans for the development of mechanisms for online consultation. Neither the section of the document that details the "critical success factors" which "will determine the success of the e-government strategy" (SSC 2001a, pp. 8-9), nor the section entitled "delivering the goods – specific deliverables and milestones to implement e-government" by 2002 (SSC 2001a, pp. 11-13), discuss feedback mechanisms in any form. It therefore remains somewhat unclear in the e-government strategy as to the exact form online consultation will take. The most detailed discussion of these mechanisms emerged later, in the draft portal strategy documents, released in June 2001.

The introduction to the 'strategy overview' of the draft portal strategy (SSC 2001b) restates the Government's commitment to encouraging the development of online forms of political participation and interaction in policy-making: "over time the portal will allow customers to ... participate in policy creation and other democratic processes of local and central government" (SSC 2001b, p. 4). Information and feedback from the public will be transmitted via the people using the portal, ultimately to the 'back office' (continuing the retail-themed terminology) of government agencies. The strategy overview explains further how the portal strategy is intended to support the goal of 'participation' as outlined in the April 2001 e-government strategy document:

A strong customer-centred portal, accessible from a variety of channels, when and where the customers want, designed with ease of use in mind will facilitate the citizens to be better informed and enhance the degree of participation by customers. (SSC 2001b, p. 19)

While the portal strategy makes use of the rhetoric of participatory democracy, the actual model of participation that the Government envisages remains focused primarily on the provision of information, and based on utilising ICT as a means of improving the reach and effectiveness of existing policy-making processes. The primary focus throughout the portal strategy, as previously noted, is on the possibilities of ICT in improving linkages between existing government information and services, and so providing efficiency gains and reduced cost for government. So, “the portal is to escalate any policy issues to [the] e-Government unit and appropriate agencies”, and is not intended to be used to “build policy” (SSC 2001b, pp. 14). This statement seems strange, given the Government’s repeated prior references to public participation in policy-making. As we will see in the following part of the chapter, however, the explanation for this apparent contradiction lies in the model of online participation currently adopted by the New Zealand Government.

#### **IV. PUBLIC CONSULTATION AND ONLINE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: THE QUESTION OF ACCESS**

##### **1. The Consultative Approach to Online Participation in Government**

At first glance, the portal strategy’s statement that the government portal will not be used to build policy seems to contradict the Government’s general rhetoric of online participation. The explanation for this apparent discrepancy lies in the nature of ‘customer participation’ that the Government envisages. The role of public participation in policy making will be in ‘escalating policy issues to appropriate agencies’; that is, in bringing issues to the attention of government by providing feedback and information on government performance. Individual government agencies will then be able to respond by building appropriate policies based on this information received from the public. In this

way, public participation can contribute to the development of more effective governmental policies, within the limits and terms set by each agency. This model of online participation adopted by the New Zealand government follows current trends in the international governmental use of ICT.

To the extent that governments have attempted to provide for online public participation in government, they have for the most part adopted a very similar approach. As Chadwick and May note, the dominant governmental model of participatory ICT project has been 'consultative'. In this model of e-government:

ICTs facilitate the communication of citizen opinion *to* government. Information is regarded as a resource which can be used to provide 'better' government. By utilising the speed of ICT networks the governments can seek voter opinion on particular issues to guide policy making. (Chadwick and May 2001, p. 13, emphasis in original)

From the outset, the New Zealand Government's approach to online public participation in e-government has predominantly exhibited the features of the 'consultative' model of e-government as described by Chadwick and May. While the Government now considers increased communication to be a key aspect of its ICT programme, the focus of ICT use in this area will be on "the communication of citizen opinion *to* government", rather than broader, open-ended and multidirectional deliberative processes (Chadwick and May 2001, p. 13, emphasis in original). Thus, the Government is repeatedly portrayed in the e-government literature as *receiving* information and opinion from members of the public, and *reacting* to these inputs. This may be a process of broader public consultation, but falls some way short of the interactive processes of open public deliberation on political issues that have been hoped for by many commentators on online democracy.

As discussed in chapter three, the Government has consistently associated the provision of more political information with greater political participation. The Government continues to expect, based on its assumptions about the nature of public participation and its own plans to enable limited online consultation, that simply "enabl[ing] easier access to government information and processes" will lead to a public that is "better informed and better able to participate". The simplicity of this equation is explained by the model

of political participation the Government has adopted; since the public's role is to be limited to providing feedback on already established government policies, the provision of information alone is adequate. As we have seen, the provision of information alone is unlikely to rejuvenate the political process by creating widespread participation and rejuvenated interest in politics, as hoped for by many supporters of ICT. However, providing wider access to more and better information on developing government policies should have benefits in terms of more efficient government, since those citizens most interested and knowledgeable on a particular issue will be able to act somewhat more effectively within the limited avenues for consultation made available.

The section of the portal 'strategy overview' on portal features and functions (SSC 2001b, pp. 31-5) describes under 'deliverables' how the goal of "enabling customer participation" will be achieved by the features and functions of the portal:

- Portal enables customers to get in touch with government officials easily
- Portal will reflect the needs and demands of the customer segments
- Portal facilitates the evolution of e-communities by enabling customer collaboration
- Portal enables customer participation in government planning, public consultation, voting/referenda and policy-making processes. (SSC 2001b, p. 35)

Similarly, the section of the 'high-level implementation plan' of the portal strategy that deals with 'enabling customer participation' states that:

The portal can provide a number of key services that will encourage customer participation, both individually and as an e-community. These include participation that is solicited (such as voting, referenda, census and surveys) as well as unsolicited participation such as e-mail to public servants or public submissions or citizens' referenda. (SSC 2001c, p. 22)

In both these extracts, government is portrayed as receiving information on citizen preferences from the public. It is important to note the technologies that the strategy documents focus on in these interactions (the Government's approach to 'e-community' will be examined in the following chapter). As Chadwick and May (2001, p. 14) note, in consultative models of online participation, "much is made of instant referendums, electronic voting, and the possibility of continuous democracy." So, in the extracts these plebiscitary mechanisms are seen as being of key importance, along with other simple

consultative technologies such as e-mail. These techniques provide government with a pool of data that can easily be managed and manipulated, producing useful information about the specific wants and needs of particular sections of the public. The feedback that government receives through these mechanisms is able to be integrated into existing governmental policy-making processes particularly easily, and is therefore highly attractive in government.

The portal itself will provide a gateway from which government agencies can collect relevant opinions from and information about their specific publics, and so tailor their services more effectively. So, for example, the strategy overview states that the portal will benefit government agencies, since “the barriers to agency services and information will be significantly reduced. Agencies can be more pro-active and targeted in their relationships with customers” (SSC 2001b, p. 17). More public feedback on government services “will highlight duplicate or inefficient processes. This will allow agencies to identify and improve processes, driven by customer demand” (SSC 2001b, p. 18). Agencies will benefit, because “feedback can readily be obtained on proposed legislative changes” (SSC 2001b, p. 18), while the public’s role remains largely reactive to government initiatives and thus easily managed and within the control of the agencies.

The Government displays a high degree of optimism about the value of online consultation in encouraging democratic public participation in politics. However, there are a number of concerns with the Government’s ‘consultative’ approach that should be addressed. A key issue that will influence the success of the e-government programme will be the question of whether or not equal access to online government can be achieved.

## **2. Access Issues in Online Governmental Consultations**

As discussed in chapter three, the most difficult challenges facing attempts to increase public participation in politics involve increasing public knowledge of and interest in political issues. The success of online governmental consultations will ultimately depend



on the willingness of a broad range of citizens to become involved. If equal access to these consultations is not achieved, some groups in society will clearly be advantaged, by gaining more effective access to government decision-making. Most governments have thus far adopted a quite limited approach to access, targeting access to the technologies themselves. However, ensuring equal access to online government consultations goes far beyond the mere public provision of physical access to ICT terminals, though this alone is an expensive proposition when attempted on a large scale. Even more difficult, however, will be the overcoming of less tangible barriers to online participation in policy-making, manifest in public attitudes towards both ICTs and towards government and politics itself.

Even within government, uptake of ICTs, even basic technologies such as e-mail, has been slow. For instance, by May 2000 only 159 of 659 members of the British Parliament could be reached by e-mail (Thomas 2000). Moreover, many governmental ICT-based attempts to improve public access to government have encountered problems. In almost all of the more of the more ambitious projects attempting to provide access through publicly-provided hardware, such as Columbus, Ohio's QUBE network, Santa Monica's PEN network and even Minitel in France, use of the networks remains concentrated in a very small proportion of the public (Arterton 1989, Schultz 1994, Dutton 1999 pp. 181-2, and see also the various case studies of other civic networks in Tsagarousianou et al. (eds.) 1998). Even the more modest Internet-based governmental programmes of information publishing have faced continuing difficulties in encouraging access, both to the technology and to government itself (see for example Tambini 1998). Uptake of new technologies and access to government information has repeatedly been found to be

lower among women, ethnic minorities, people in rural areas and lower-income earners<sup>45</sup>, while reasonably wealthy, urban, white, college-educated males have generally been over-represented as heavy users of both new ICTs and online government information and services<sup>46</sup>.

Local governments in New Zealand have adopted a cautious approach to encouraging access to online government, primarily focused on improving public access to the Internet. Even here, initiatives have been modest, generally limited to a small number of public terminals located in libraries, council offices or other public buildings. The Wellington City Council has been the most active in this regard, establishing the InfoCity Strategy. The goals of the InfoCity Unit were stated in 1995 as being:

- To accelerate the normal process of economic development;
- To enhance the achievement of social and community development principles in the adoption of emerging information technologies;
- To create a new 'frontier' for business and community development through the development of a new telecommunications infrastructure;
- To ensure that the deployment of new technologies is environmentally responsible. (Wellington City Council 1997, p. 2)

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<sup>45</sup> For example, the 1999 *Falling Through the Net* report by the US National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) states that:

- "Urban households with incomes of \$75,000 and higher are more than twenty times more likely to have access to the Internet than rural households at the lowest income levels, and more than nine times as likely to have a computer at home.
- Whites are more likely to have access to the Internet from home than Blacks or Hispanics have from any location.
- Black and Hispanic households are approximately one-third as likely to have home Internet access as households of Asian/Pacific Islander descent, and roughly two-fifths as likely as White households.
- Regardless of income level, Americans living in rural areas are lagging behind in Internet access. Indeed, at the lowest income levels, those in urban areas are more than twice as likely to have Internet access than those earning the same income in rural areas" (NTIA 1999, executive summary, p.1).

For recent discussions of the difficulties faced by women in gaining access to these technologies, see Herring (1996), Hawthorne and Klein (eds.) (1997), Harcourt (ed.) (1999) and Kirkup (2001).

<sup>46</sup> The experience of Santa Monica's PEN network provides ample evidence of this problem; as Van Tassel (1996) notes "PEN users exercise considerable political clout, in large part because they differ significantly from typical Santa Monicans. PENners make more money (\$50,000 annually, compared to the Santa Monica average of \$36,000), are more likely to be male (65% to 50%), and are more likely to be college graduates (64% to 42%). Finally, 60% of heavy PEN users describe themselves as "very interested" in politics. The evaluation study notes that 'PEN registrants were more active (than the average city resident) in each of seven types of local political activity, ranging from attending City Council meetings to contacting city officials'." Dahlberg (2000) found a similar situation with regard to Minnesota's E-Democracy project, particularly with respect to male and female participation.

To this end, the Wellington City Council has established a number of projects aimed at encouraging various forms of access to the benefits of ICTs. Key projects in this regard were the development of the library as the Wellington 'Info Centre', the establishment of "a number of public Internet-accessing touch screen kiosks", and the establishment of the 'E-Vision' multimedia centre in downtown Wellington (Wellington City Council 1997, p. 2; see also Wellington City Council 2001 and E-vision 2002). The InfoCity project seems to have stalled somewhat; while some projects have continued to progress, references to the InfoCity project itself have become rare. This echoes the experience of a similar Wellington City Council project initially titled 'Knowledge City' (though this 'brand' has subsequently been registered by Palmerston North), which "has not had sufficient resources to significantly develop as envisaged" (Wellington City Council 1997, p. 2). While various councils have been active in establishing ICT-based, branded initiatives, with the goal of encouraging ICT investment in businesses and public access to the technologies, attempts to encourage public access to government through online interactions have been limited.

The New Zealand Government has from the outset shown an awareness of concerns about unequal access to its online information and services. As the beginnings of a solution to this problem, the New Zealand Government is engaged in developing a programme to overcome the 'digital divide' between those who have access to ICTs and those who do not (see SSC 2001e, p. 24). As it notes in the Labour Government's 2000 e-government vision statement, one of "the important issues the Government needs to take into account in developing ways of using information and communications technologies to improve New Zealanders' participation in our democracy" is that:

People may be quickly divided into two groups – those who have skills and tools to use the new technologies and those who do not. (SSC 2000, p. 2)

In the vision statement, the Government's response to this threat is to ensure that:

- conventional means of access to government are maintained for those people who need them;
- community access to the Internet is available for those people who, for any reason, cannot access it from their homes; and

- educational and public information programmes are used to help New Zealanders, young and old, in using the new technologies. (SSC 2000, p. 2)

These are noble sentiments, but on closer analysis appear somewhat inconsistent with the Government's broader, technologically-focused programme of online information and service provision, particularly as expressed in later documents developed by the E-Government Unit. In the first place, while the Government will maintain traditional citizen access channels for those unable to use the Internet, there is the risk that those unable to make the transition to e-government may become increasingly marginalised. As already noted, the 2001 e-government strategy document states that "by 2004 the Internet will be the dominant means of enabling ready access to government information, services and processes" (SSC 2001a, p. 1). If e-government will have the benefits that the Government claims, those unable to gain access to it may be further disadvantaged (Wilhelm 2001).

To avoid the growth of inequality in access opportunities, the Government states that it will provide "community access to the Internet" to help enable widespread uptake of the new technologies, and so distribute the benefits of ICT access. Again, these may be admirable objectives, but international experience has shown them to be difficult and costly to achieve. Nonetheless, the National Government's 1999 vision statement suggests that those without access to the Internet can simply "take a walk down town to the library, postal service or local cyber-café, and use theirs" (SSC 1999, introduction, p. 1). In the 2000 vision statement the new Labour Government appeared to recognise these difficulties, committing to public "education and information programmes" on ICT in order to help overcome access barriers. However, the difficulty and expense of developing and maintaining widespread public education programmes, if they are to be equitable and effective within the timeframe envisaged in the strategy document, may prove daunting, and full details are yet to be provided.

In their attempts to increase citizen participation in politics, New Zealand governments, in common with most governments around the world, have focused primarily on physical barriers to ICT access and political involvement. Certainly, lack of resources and

geographical isolation are significant barriers to the effective use of advanced ICTs. Developing nations in particular face enormous barriers to encouraging widespread ICT access in the face of more pressing social concerns, and thus risk falling further behind more technologically advanced nations (Tehrani 1990, chapter 8, Schultz 1994, p. 111, Haywood 1995, Wresch 1996). In comparison, New Zealand would appear to be in an excellent position to overcome access barriers. While there are significant, and growing, economic inequalities in New Zealand society, New Zealand is a technologically developed society, with traditionally high up-take of new technologies. This, and the facts of New Zealand's relatively small size and increasingly urban society, would seem to justify the an optimistic assessment of the likelihood that the benefits of e-government will be fairly shared as full access to ICTs is gradually achieved.

Indeed, the governmental focus on physical and economic barriers, and on quantitative, measurable forms of participation, leads it to a highly optimistic view of the ability of ICTs to overcome inequalities in access to government. Despite the difficulties of ensuring equal opportunities for access experienced internationally, the New Zealand Government remains remarkably sanguine about its ability to ensure widespread access and the benefits that will result. For example, the e-government strategy states that "all New Zealanders will benefit when customers can easily access and interact with government through multiple access channels and it will lead to a lessening of some of society's divisions" (SSC 2001, p. 14). Earlier, the National Government's 1999 e-government vision statement had argued that:

**E-Government:**

**Will bring a new kind of equality**

The Internet brings a new equality for the regions. By giving equal access to all, it abolishes the tyranny of distance. (SSC 1999, vision, p. 1).

Since the release of the 2001 e-government strategy, the Government has begun to focus on the development of the governmental portal, NZGO, as a means of simplifying access to online government. The portal strategy states that "the portal will be designed to ensure equitable, unbiased access, regardless of race, age, locality or gender. It will be accessible to people with disabilities" (SSC 2001b, p. 21). Moreover, "it will be a uniquely New Zealand portal reflecting New Zealand people and land, its history and

values, culture and heritage”, including “Maori culture and heritage [which] can be reflected through the portal” (SSC 2001b, pp. 7, 30). This is an extraordinarily confident statement of the ability of ICTs in the forms currently adopted to represent diverse cultures, which downplays the significance of cultural barriers in favour of a belief in the universal appeal of the technologies.

While governments in New Zealand have displayed a high level of optimism with regard to attempts to overcome the many barriers to equal public access to ICTs, encouraging widespread public participation in online politics and government is likely to prove difficult in the consultative model that has been adopted. While physical and economic barriers to ICT access are certainly significant, the barriers to effective public access to online government are not limited to physical or economic barriers that can be remedied by the provision of public access terminals. As Dutton (1999, p. 13) notes, “focusing too narrowly on the question of universal access to ICT network infrastructures promotes the false assumption that access to technologies *per se* is good, thus marginalizing other complex issues of tele-access.” Hague and Loader (1999, p. 11) state the matter more simply: “providing physical access to ICTs is one thing; giving citizens good reason to want to make use of them is another.” Equally as important as, though related to, these economic barriers to access are situational and cultural barriers such as time and energy constraints, language barriers and cultural or gender role expectations. (Arterton 1987, pp. 129-31, Burn and Konrad 1987, Kurland and Egan 1996, Lamb 1996)<sup>47</sup>. Lack of trust, knowledge or interest in new technologies or in government itself are also important, and can only be overcome by time, education and positive practical experience in participation (Kurland and Egan 1996). The provision of ICT education programmes and more convenient access to online government is, for all its apparent appeal<sup>48</sup>, a narrow,

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<sup>47</sup> As Dahlberg (2000) and Kirkup (2001) have noted, while there is evidence that the discrepancy between men’s and women’s ICT use in Western nations has begun to decline in recent years, women continue to participate in online political initiatives in considerably lower rates than men. There may be many reasons for this discrepancy, which will be examined in a later chapter.

<sup>48</sup> Recent government work on the ‘digital divide’, reported in the December 2001 update to the e-government strategy document (SSC 2001d), expresses the Government’s view of the continuing importance of ICT in “enabl[ing] individuals and communities to participate fully in the economic, social, educational, cultural and democratic opportunities available in a knowledge society”. It states that concerns about the divide have “led to the focusing of this work around improving community access to, and competence in, using information and communication technology” (SSC 2001c, p. 24).

technology-focused approach to the enabling of the development of a politically informed and involved society.

Just as is the case with ICT itself, barriers to online public participation in government are not merely physical or economic; there are a range of attitudinal variables that are just as important in influencing an individual's willingness to participate. Important attitudes to politics associated with a lack of participation include a low level of system trust, lack of interest in politics, a perception that participation is of no value in influencing political outcomes, a lack of feelings of community belonging and civic virtue, and so on (see Krampen 1991, De Luca 1995, Hacker 1996). These attitudinal variables may be influenced by a variety of factors, of which poor socio-economic status and low levels of education and knowledge of the political system are generally regarded as the most important (McLosky and Zahler 1984 pp. 240-53, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, pp. 13-5, Vowles et al. 1993 p. 41 and 1995 pp. 134-5). Even to the extent that inequalities in access to ICTs can be addressed, the willingness of the public to participate in online policy-making online is questionable as long as negative attitudes to politics and government remain widespread (Hacker 1996).

The portal, planned for release in June 2002, will clearly follow the pattern set by other major governments, focusing on providing simpler and more convenient access to existing government information and services. Yet as a means of encouraging access the portal may be limited. While linkages to existing government information may be able to be presented in a more coherent, convenient format, thus potentially making it easier to find some government information, in itself this is a limited answer to a complex problem. Again, public lack of trust, knowledge or interest in government and politics are likely to be significant barriers to the accessing of online political information, barriers that more convenient access alone is unlikely to overcome (Krampen 1991, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Di Luca 1995).

While e-mail contact with government is increasingly available, information about the use and importance of e-mail communications, and how public e-mail will be used by its

recipients, is often more difficult to find. Governments are generally using electronic mail as a supplement to existing forms of access, within established frameworks of public interaction. The evidence suggests that this is unlikely to engage the interest of the public at large; those who currently choose not to participate in politics are unlikely to be induced to do so as a result of the marginal advantages of e-mail as compared to standard mail (Lamb 1996). As previously noted, those most likely to write letters and engage in other forms of unsolicited communication with officials are unsurprisingly those most interested in and knowledgeable about politics. Many who currently do not participate are cynical about the effectiveness of participating, are unsure of the most effective means of doing so, or are unsure as to where in the political structure participation should be directed (see Di Palma 1970, pp. 37-43, Krampen 1991, pp. 2-4, Vowles et al. 1995, p 146, Tambini 1998, pp. 101). Merely supplying the e-mail addresses of various government agencies and officials will do little to overcome these attitudes and so encourage broader participation. It may therefore be that under current circumstances, providing e-mail access to officials and politicians merely provides another, more effective tool for those already involved in political issues to exercise some influence over the political system. Moreover, those most interested and involved in politics often come from affluent and educated social groups, as do those most likely to have personal access to ICTs. There is thus a danger that, if universal access to both ICTs and government consultations is not achieved, the result may be a further increase in already existing inequalities in political influence.

The success of attempts to encourage broad-based public participation in politics online is thus likely to depend in large part on the overcoming of negative perceptions of government. This is certain to be an extremely challenging task, particularly unless long-standing inequalities in education and socio-economic status can be significantly alleviated. Technology, for all its apparent attractiveness to governments around the world as a means of encouraging political participation, is of questionable value in overcoming these sorts of social and political problems, and may well frequently contribute to the worsening of these inequalities. Widespread public participation in politics is unlikely to be achieved solely by technological means, since access is a far



more complex and difficult issue than governments frequently appear willing to allow. There is thus a danger that a model of consultation that places priority on unsolicited e-mail communication may simply encourage inequalities in access to government, and, as will be discussed in the following section, the fragmentation of the politically active based on interest.

### **3. The Implications of the Consultative Model for Political Organisation and Participation**

Not only is online citizen-government consultation of questionable value in encouraging widespread public participation in politics, this model also appears unlikely to fulfil the hopes of those expecting e-government to contribute to the development of an open, critical political system. Against the expectations of some commentators, the consultative model of e-government seems most likely to contribute to the development of a form of what Bruce Bimber (1998) calls 'accelerated pluralism'. Bimber argues that e-government as currently developing will speed already established trends in political participation, leading to "a shift to a system of more rapidly changing issue groups, with less stability and less dependence on private and public institutional structures" Bimber (1998, p. 155). Thus, as a result of ICT-enabled political participation, "pluralism may increasingly take on a fragmented and unstable character, through the rapid organisation of issue publics for the duration of a lobbying effort, followed by their dissolution" (Bimber 1998, p. 156). There are several reasons to doubt that the consultative model of online political participation being utilised by most governments is likely to live up to the hopes of ICT enthusiasts.

Even to the extent that the governmental provision of e-mail contact does successfully encourage citizen participation in politics, there is no guarantee that public e-mail will be an effective means of communicating with politicians or officials, particularly since in many cases e-mail from members of the public is not even read (Tambini 1999). In particular, the large volume of e-mail (not to mention standard mail) that some addresses

receive limits the effectiveness of one-to-one e-mail as a tool for interactive communication. For government officials and politicians, e-mail is therefore most useful in responding to simple requests for information, rather than as a means of two-way public communication with citizens about policy issues (Hacker 1996).

This suggests that, as access to ICTs increases, individual e-mails sent to politicians may become increasingly ineffective as a means of influencing government, except where they are sent as part of an organised e-mail campaign involving many citizens. Indeed, there have been already a number of high-profile instances of e-mail campaigns being successfully used to influence policy (see Schwartz 1996, Rash 1997). The success of these campaigns led to the establishment of a number of web sites, such as Speakout.com, Petition.org and Vote.com, dedicated to encouraging and facilitating the mass-sending of e-mails and petitions to American politicians and officials on a range of selectable policy issues. Others, such as Moveon.org and the now defunct PowerVote even attempted to organise online a pool of funds based on small individual contributions, with which to influence congresspersons on individual issues (see Plotz 1999, Weisberg 2000).

The result of these new forms of online access has been described by Plotz (1999) as 'five-minute activism', whereby ordinary citizens can quickly and easily pool together opinions on individual issues in a semi-coordinated fashion, in the attempt to exercise influence over the policy process. While the success and high profile of these e-mail campaigns has raised hopes of some (see Schwartz 1996 and Rash 1997) with regard to the ability of the ordinary citizen to gain political influence online, there is reason for caution. These processes may facilitate the transmission and compilation of opinions, but do not in themselves contribute to the development of a more open, reflexive political system.

Of course, more ambitious governmental attempts at online consultation go beyond a reliance on providing e-mail contacts, adopting a range of techniques offering of varying degrees of public interactivity in the attempt to encourage the online communication of

citizen opinion to government. As we have seen, a key feature of many governmental (and non-governmental) proposals to increase online consultations between government and citizens has been the use of plebiscitary mechanisms such as online polls and referenda. Such online polls will provide instant feedback on government policies, and will potentially create the means for ordinary citizens to participate at a fundamental level in decision-making on important issues. However, for all their apparent attractiveness to many enthusiasts both within and outside of government, online plebiscitary mechanisms should be approached with caution.

The attractiveness of online polling for governmental purposes lies in the ability of these technologies to provide rapid feedback on policy issues, so contributing to the improvement of government outputs in the form of policy decisions. While polling mechanisms may potentially be able to encourage broader-based participation in decision-making, in the model adopted by most governments public influence will remain within clear boundaries set by government. In the case of polling, the public can be consulted with regard to defining the problem and the framing of options, but in the consultative model of online participation, ultimate power in determining the agenda, framing questions and setting options will of necessity remain in the hands of politicians and officials (Beiner 1988, McLean 1989, Budge 1993). Public participation is thereby limited to choosing between a limited range of options on governmental initiatives, while the power to define the terms of the debate at a policy-making level is severely limited (Wilhelm 1999, 2000). Furthermore, plebiscitary devices often restrict opportunities for discussion, particularly due to the speed of decision-making they encourage, and create well-publicised dangers of dominance of policy making by large majorities at the expense of the rights of minorities (Abramson 1988, Budge 1993, London 1995, p. 36, Althaus 1996, Wilhelm 1999).

Other aspects of online networks support trends towards more rapid, fragmented and isolated forms of political participation. The public, as well as governments and corporations, has adapted the information management powers of ICT, so as to effectively filter out information on topics deemed to be of no interest. By means of

search engines and other sophisticated 'personalisation' services, the intrusion of news and opinion beyond the immediately interesting can be easily kept to a bare minimum (Brown and Duguid 2000, chapter 2). Indeed, the very structure of the Internet supports these processes. While television is broadcast from a central station and is passively received by the consumer, the Internet requires the public to actively seek out and access information from any one of millions of web pages, hence the necessity for filtering technologies (Bimber 1998, Brown and Duguid 2000, pp. 37-42). Many supporters of online democracy have pointed to these developments as being evidence of the democratic, horizontal nature of power on the Internet; since content cannot be controlled centrally, citizens are free to seek out independent, critical information and participate with others in an interactive, participatory form (see for example Meyrowitz 1997, O'Connor 1997, Locke 1999).

Interestingly, the New Zealand Government has adopted the "personalisation of [the] individual view of government" as a objective of the e-government portal, as a means of encouraging public access (SSC 2001b p. 36 and 2001c, p. 23). The implementation plan of the portal strategy states that:

This will involve having the ability to save customer preferences... The customer could then adopt several profiles for using the system, depending on their current role (parent, citizen, business person, senior citizen). (SSC 2001c, p. 24)

The government believes that "this level of personalised interaction, if used appropriately, can drive high levels of compliance and personal satisfaction (SSC 2001c, p. 24). However, as Sunstein (2001, p. 2) notes, "from the standpoint of democracy, filtering is a mixed blessing". The difficulty with this approach is that effective public democracy requires a degree of common experience and interaction among citizens, while exposure to as diverse a range of experiences and opinions is vital to the development of an open and tolerant political society (Brown and Duguid 2000, chapter 3, Sunstein 2001, pp. 2-6). To the extent that people limit new information to only those topics they have previously determined to be of interest, or only interact with those sharing an identical opinion, their effectiveness as participants in broader political society is likely to be constrained (Kurland and Egan 1996, pp. 389-99, Bohman 1999). Filtering

of information and interaction to topics of interest is of course a natural process, but where ICT enables or encourages extreme forms of filtering, there is the potential that the quality of democratic participation may suffer, and political extremism and intolerance may prosper (see Dutton 1996, Kurland and Egan 1996, pp. 389-91, Pfaffenberger 1996, Bimber 1998, Mukerji and Simon 1998, Sunstein 2001 pp. 6-12). Against the determinism of both utopian and dystopian arguments about the effects of cyberspace on democratic politics, it seems likely that in present governmental models of political interaction the development of internet politics will have impacts working in many, often contradictory, directions.

As will be discussed in the following chapter, there is evidence that ICT can successfully be used to encourage these necessary conditions, particularly at the local level through civic networks. However, filtering technologies, personalisation and consultative forms of political participation based on private e-mail and plebiscites would appear more likely to promote the isolation and fragmentation of political participation into small, closed, like-minded groups. Online government consultations may, perhaps, make more widespread participation in politics a possibility. However, the fragmented forms of political participation that many ICT-based consultative mechanisms seem to promote should raise concerns with regard to the future of democratic community. The final chapter of this thesis will examine these qualitative aspects of online political participation, exploring the implications of governmental approaches to online democracy for the quality of deliberative participation in policy-making.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Governments have seen in the communicative features of ICTs the potential to improve public access to and participation in government processes. Greater online participation is expected to have benefits both in the development of a more participatory, democratic political culture, and in the improvement of government efficiency, accountability and responsiveness. However, there are reasons to doubt that the management theory-

influenced 'consultative' approach to the provision of public access to online participation generally adopted by governments will contribute significantly to the creation of a more active and involved democratic society.

Government consultation programmes have for the most part been very basic, despite frequent governmental use of the language and concepts of democratic theory. The focus of these programmes has been on the improvement of the efficiency and accountability of government service provision through public inputs, and on improving public access to existing governmental processes. To this end, governments have made considerable use of limited, one-way mechanisms for facilitating public communication with politicians and officials. However, there have also been some governmental initiatives aimed at providing for public debate on political issues, and signs that governments may be growing increasingly interested in the possibilities of online deliberation. The possibilities of online deliberation, and governmental approaches to the issues, will be examined in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **PUBLIC DISCUSSION AND ONLINE POLITICS: DELIBERATION, TECHNOLOGY AND ONLINE PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT**

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

While the plebiscitary, consultative model of interaction has often dominated discussions, particularly within government, of online democracy, political discussion has from the outset been a key component of cyberspace. The enormous success of online discussion in recent years has inspired many ambitious hopes for a future form of democratic decision-making based in ICT-enabled political discussion. Interestingly, some governments have also begun to incorporate discursive forms of political participation into their discussions of online government, suggesting that popular expectations for and uses of ICT may exert some influence over government ICT projects.

This chapter will examine the governmental approach to the facilitation of online political discussion. Part one will explore the theoretical bases of hopes for the emergence of a deliberative form of online democracy, and governmental ICT projects that have attempted to put theory into practice. Part two will focus on the approach of New Zealand governments to online public discussion of political issues. Part three will discuss the extent to which the models of online discussion and participation generally adopted by governments live up to the expectations of theorists of online participatory democracy.

## II. ONLINE PUBLIC CONSULTATION AND DELIBERATION IN INTERNATIONAL GOVERNMENTAL ICT INITIATIVES

### 1. Organisation, Participation and Political Discussion in Theories of Online Democracy

As noted in the previous chapter, the focus of discussions of online democracy has often been on the potential of ICTs in encouraging direct online participation through public consultation with government and online polling. However, an alternate strand of participatory theories of online democracy focuses on the potential of ICT to revolutionise the role of public talk in a democracy. This approach to online democracy has developed from general deliberative theories of democratic participation. Theorists of deliberative democracy argue that deliberation should operate in a reflexive manner, based on the critical examination of cultural values, equality, mutual understanding and co-operation, and where possible a concern for the public good. Deliberative theories of participatory democracy have expanded and broadened enormously, to the point that generalisations are difficult. There are now many models of political deliberation in a democracy; what they share is a concern for careful, fair and open discussion of political issues, and the nature and limits of politics itself, as a vital component of a fully functioning democracy<sup>49</sup>. Political deliberation may act as a check on the unrestrained or rash use of government power by forcing the consideration of alternative points of view, as a decision-making tool in itself, and as a means of increasing understanding and toleration within and between societies.

As television, cable and computer networking technologies have developed, the online democracy movement received a significant boost, and attention turned to these technologies as more powerful and flexible communications tools (for details of a

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<sup>49</sup> There is now a vast, established literature on deliberative democracy, (led by Habermas, Rawls, Mansfield, Guttman and Thompson, Fishkin, Fraser, Benhabib, and Bohman, among others) and this is not the place to attempt a comprehensive review. While there are numerous theoretical disagreements among scholars in this area across a wide range of issues, they are in accordance to the extent that they all share a concern for promoting deliberation about political issues.



number of largely non-governmental projects, see TAN+N2 1998). In doing so, participatory ICT projects have drawn to some degree from both plebiscitary and deliberative strands of participatory democratic theory in establishing online networks, aiming to encourage online discussion and debate, and also by providing online polling mechanisms. The rise of participatory theories of democracy has inspired numerous participatory experiments in 'electronic democracy', initially based primarily around use of the telephone. However, early experiments generally remained limited to the local level, were frequently non-governmental, and met only mixed success in terms of engaging public interest and participation (Arterton 1987, Abramson et al. 1988, Dutton 1999, pp. 184-5). The rise of the personal computer and the Internet since the mid-1980s has renewed hopes for the successful development of participatory forms of online democracy.

Many commentators have pointed to the communicative aspects of cyberspace as harbouring possibilities for the rebirth of political communication in modern society<sup>50</sup>. Cyberspace allows the possibility of many-to-many communication, involving the thorough critical investigation of any issue based on the equal participation of all concerned. Advocates argue that technology could thus enable the public to effectively challenge the power of established media organisations as mediators political information and opinion (for example Schickler 1994, Grossman 1995, Budge 1996, Berman and Weitzner 1997, Wilhelm 1999, Barney 2000). Key to this argument is the concept of 'interactivity', whereby the public itself no longer passively receives information, but itself is responsible for the continual formation and contestation of information (see for example Sawney 1996, O'Connor 1997). Furthermore, the degree of anonymity allowed by text communication may allow the complete 'bracketing' of identities advocated by Habermas and his followers and thus an overcoming of inequality related to minority group membership<sup>51</sup>. Text-based, online forms of interaction may also allow slower,

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<sup>50</sup> Authors who focus on the deliberative possibilities of cyberspace include Tehranian 1990, Grossman 1995, Budge 1996, Dahlberg 1996 and 2000, Kurland and Egan 1996, Berman and Weitzner 1997, Friedland 1996, Coleman 1999, Malina 1999. See Wilhelm 1999 and Barney 2000 for further discussion and examples.

<sup>51</sup> Tehranian 1990, Rheingold (1993, p. 26), Dahlberg 1996 and 2000, Kurland and Egan (1996, pp. 395-6), Jordan (1999, pp. 59-79), Evans (2000).

more detailed, considered argumentation than is possible through other media, promising a modern rebirth of something approaching the 'society of letters' of the nineteenth century (Dahlberg 1996, Nixon and Johansson 1999, pp. 142-8).

The success of the Internet and its related technologies in encouraging and facilitating simultaneous online communication between large numbers of people on a diverse range of topics, has encouraged hopes that this process contributes to the opening of space for the public sphere to challenge the domination of political debate by political elites (Tehrani 1990, pp. 234-7, Kurland and Egan 1996, Dahlberg 1996 and 2000). ICT enables new forums for public expression of political opinions, and so also new ways for the public to become engaged in the political process through direct access to public officials (Brants et al. 1996). Many now argue that this process should be developed and encouraged and directly connected to the political system, by creating new avenues for direct, ICT-enabled public involvement in political agenda-setting and policy-making processes (see Budge 1996, TAN+N2 1998). These developments, it is argued, will lead to more public participation, greater accountability, and better, fairer decisions. In the eyes of many analysts, these technologies therefore have the potential to overcome barriers to the development of a modern, larger scale form of the kind of town-hall or *agora* democracy of some small communities, characterised by inter-personal interaction and debate around political issues (London 1995). At the very least, many hope the new technologies will enable far greater connections to be created between governments and their citizens, through increased discussion and consultation in public forums and through e-mail campaigns (Coleman 1999a, Schwartz 1996).

## **2. Online Public Discussion in Governmental ICT Initiatives**

Public interaction and debate online has been carried out for some years in non-governmental, often local community-based settings, and has frequently been hailed as holding the potential for the revitalisation of the public sphere of political deliberation (for example, Weston 1997, Coleman 1999a, Locke 1999). Inspired by these non-

governmental initiatives, some governments or government agencies have attempted to encourage many-to-many debate among citizens in a governmental setting. In practice, this involves providing one or more public forums for online, generally e-mail based, discussion (see Lamb 1996, Tambini 1998, Tsagarousianou 1998b, Hale et al. 1999). For the most part, governments have adopted a quite unobtrusive approach to establishing rules and managing content within these public forums. Forums are generally organised by topic of interest, and may allow varying degrees of limits on the content and nature of contributions.

Some local-government level ICT projects, in particular, have attempted to encourage more open-ended debate in a political context between citizens themselves. Among the most prominent of these initiatives have been the Santa Monica PEN, the Minnesota E-Democracy Network, Bologna's IperBoIE network, Manchester's HOST project, the Amsterdam City projects (Brants et al. 1996, Francissen and Brants 1999, Dutton 1999) and Greece's Network Pericles (see Dahlberg 1996 and 2000, Tsagarousianou 1998a and 1998b, Dutton 1999). These networks all combine varying degrees of governmental consultation on policy with the provision of public spaces for open online discussion and debate. These spaces may take the form of online bulletin boards or discussion groups, to which the public contributes via e-mail, or, less frequently, electronic space for live discussion in a 'town hall' format using Internet Relay Chat or similar teleconferencing technologies.

Central governments in general have been far less willing to facilitate these types online discussion and debate among citizens. In general, most central (and indeed local) governmental participatory initiatives have adopted a consultative approach to online participation, focused on the use of e-mail, online feedback forms and online plebiscitary devices. There have been a few notable exceptions to this rule, in particular the British Number 10 and the newly redesigned UK Online web sites, the later of which has begun

to provide public discussion forums in its Citizen Space<sup>52</sup>. There have also been isolated attempts by some politicians, including former US President Bill Clinton, to make use of teleconferencing and similar technologies to enable greater public consultation with the public in a deliberative form (Abramson et al. 1988, pp. 141-3, Hacker 1996, Coleman 1999a, pp. 198-201). In fact, in the United States, online discussion in the form of live webcast public debates between politicians, often incorporating public questions, has been a growing feature of politics for several years, particularly during election campaigns (Plotz 1999). Moreover, as noted in the previous chapter, many major governments are beginning to refer to the encouragement of active, involved public participation in the policy process as a key goal of ICT initiatives. There is, then, some justification for hopes that governments will increasingly incorporate mechanisms promoting public political discussion and organisation into their ICT projects. As the next part of the chapter will discuss, the New Zealand Government is showing signs that it wishes to be at the forefront of international governmental moves to encourage public political talk online.

### **III. NEW ZEALAND GOVERNMENTAL APPROACHES TO ONLINE PUBLIC CONSULTATION AND DELIBERATION**

As discussed in the previous chapter, there have been relatively few opportunities for active citizen participation in online government in New Zealand, and both local and central governmental efforts to encourage online participation have concentrated on facilitating public contact with politicians and officials by e-mail. Occasions for deliberative interaction between citizens and government have therefore been limited. However, there have been some opportunities for the public to make submissions on governmental policy documents online, though these have again been based on private e-mail between citizens and government. Moreover, there are signs in recent governmental

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<sup>52</sup> Similarly, United States Senators Fred Thompson and Joseph Lieberman have established the e-Government web page with the aim of involving “you - the digital citizen – as a partner in the legislative process” (Lieberman and Thompson 2002). This involves reading a short discussion on various issues, and posting comments either to the senators or on a fledgling discussion board.

statements and policy documents that the government may be paying increasing attention to the goal of encouraging online political discussion and active public involvement in policy-making.

At the local government level in New Zealand, opportunities for political discussion have been particularly limited. A number of local government web sites provide policy documents online and request public feedback, and others provide very basic online public notice boards. In general, however, these initiatives do not constitute an obvious move towards a focus on political deliberation between the public and government or among citizens themselves. No doubt, the lack of initiative shown by local governments in New Zealand and elsewhere is to a certain extent explained by a lack of resources for their ICT projects (Hale et al. 1999). However, even the more well-resourced and ambitious ICT programmes (in particular Wellington but also including the other main population centres such as Auckland and Christchurch) have failed to provide opportunities for online public discussion. Instead, these programmes have remained focused on using ICT as a means of information dispersal.

As previously noted, in the e-government literature the New Zealand Government has also primarily approached online participation as a tool by which existing government processes may be improved. ICT is thus primarily used in a one-way, consultative model of communication, in which communication from the public to government is largely private, being based on private e-mail correspondence and online polling. There are therefore relatively few opportunities for open, interactive public deliberation on policy issues in this model of e-government. However, it is important not to overstate this point. As they note (Chadwick and May 2001, pp. 11-2), the consultative model of communication identified by Chadwick and May is an 'ideal type', to which actual governmental practice may not fit perfectly. The model of online consultation "encompasses a continuum... stretching from low-level information-gathering towards (but not finally reaching) a fuller quasi-deliberative level of interaction and consultation" (Chadwick and May 2001, p. 13). Moreover, Chadwick and May (2001, p. 13) hope that the consultative model which has influenced many governmental ICT initiatives "may

however represent a transition stage, easing the development of (and supporting the demands for) more participatory models of e-government.” As will be discussed below, there have indeed been indications from the New Zealand Government that as the programme develops, political discussion may become an increasingly important component of e-government

As has been seen in previous chapters, government ministers and e-government documents have for some time referred to the potential of ICT as a means of encouraging public participation in the policy-making process. Initially, these proposals did not usually refer specifically to the encouragement of public political debate as a goal of the e-government programme. However, as the e-government programme has developed, references to online discussion have increased. It has been suggested that public participation will take the form of “interactive consultation” (SSC 2001a, p. 8) between citizens and government, enabling “customer participation in government planning, public consultation, voting/referenda and policy-making processes” (SSC 2001b, p. 35). In these extracts there appear to be some indications, particularly in references to the ‘interactive’ nature of the consultations, that the Government intends to make use of the communicative features of ICT in enabling online political discussion. These extracts do not in themselves constitute the emergence of a deliberative model of online citizen-government consultation in New Zealand. However, depending on the strength given to particular parts of the e-government literature and in the light of other government statements, they could be interpreted as the beginnings of a move in that direction.

Aside from hinting at a role for online discussion in citizen-government consultations, the Government also appears to pay some regard to hopes for the improvement of online interaction in a political context between citizens themselves. For instance, the implementation plan of the portal strategy states that “the portal can provide a number of key services that will encourage customer participation, *both individually and as an e-community*” (SSC 2001c, p. 22, emphasis added). The Government states that it intends the formation of these e-communities to be “an important aspect of enabling citizen participation in government” (SSC 2001c, p. 24). If the New Zealand Government does

indeed in the future provide online chat rooms or discussion forums on its web pages, for public debate on political issues, it would certainly become one of the few central governments that does so, and may give renewed hope to those calling for an expansion of the public sphere of discussion and deliberation into cyberspace.

The Minister of Social Services and Employment, Steve Maharey provided perhaps the most comprehensive New Zealand governmental statement the value of ICT in promoting political discussion. In early 2001, he argued that:

“Citizen engagement – which is at the heart of the new social democracy – will involve a new deliberative democracy. It will involve citizens accessing information about policy issues, and a greater measure of involvement on the part of citizens in the political process. The implications are clear... government will be required to promote universal access to information and communications technology to ensure there is equal access to information and thereby prevent the stratification of society into communication haves and have-nots”. (Maharey 2001, p. 16)

Here we see a strong statement that links ICT to the development of citizen engagement and deliberative democracy, and thus argues for the importance of achieving equal access to those technologies so as to avoid inequalities in participation and political influence. Maharey’s emphasis is on the communicative, rather than simply informational, features of ICTs, and on the importance of deliberation in public participation. Moreover, Maharey displays a quite high degree of optimism with regard to the ‘new social democracy’ and the role of technology within it.

Governments around the world have shown an increasing willingness to make use of the rhetoric of democratic participation in all its forms, and certainly New Zealand governmental interest in online public discussion of political issues appears to be on the rise. However, there is reason for caution in any assessment of hopes for a future, government-sponsored participatory online democracy. As the following part of the chapter will discuss, the approach to online participation that governments have generally adopted may serve to limit or entirely negate the potential of ICT to encourage the development of an engaged, critical, deliberative political society.

#### **IV. TECHNOLOGY AND POLITICS: CONSULTATION, DELIBERATION AND ONLINE PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT**

##### **1. “Citizens as Customers”?: The Conflation of Government Service and Democratic Participation in the New Zealand E-Government Programme**

One reason to question the effectiveness of the New Zealand e-government programme as a means encouraging the development of more democratic forms of interaction lies in the growing tendency of the e-government literature to conflate discussions of democratic participation in politics with management and service-related language and concepts. This tendency can be seen in the earliest e-government documents, but has become increasingly prevalent in later e-government literature released since the establishment of the E-Government Unit. In blurring the distinction between public participation in politics and accessing of government services, the Government raises questions about the seriousness of its commitment to encouraging democratic participation in political issues.

The first major indication of the Government’s focus on government services in matters of political participation appeared in the National Government’s September 1999 e-government vision statement. In a section headed “Two Way Information Channels”, which also included a separate reference to ‘electronic democracy’, the statement expects:

developments along the lines of:  
A Citizens’ Channel allowing agencies to deliver services electronically, including user authentication, financial transaction capability, and developing over time into an interactive TV marketplace. (SSC 1999, p. 4)

It seems somewhat surprising that ‘electronic democracy’ is considered entirely separately from the ‘Citizens’ Channel’ envisioned by the authors of the statement. Rather, the Citizens’ Channel is envisaged as becoming an “interactive TV marketplace”, focused on the “financial transaction capability” of government agencies. Many would argue that this falls some way short of the sort of active political citizenship hoped for in most theories of democracy. This sort of confusion is characteristic of a great deal of



international governmental literature on ICT, whereby terms and concepts generally associated with democratic theory are used in association with service-oriented applications of ICT. Moreover, New Zealand governmental documents have increasingly adopted this approach.

Under the Labour Government, the conflation of political participation and service delivery seen first in the National Government's 1999 e-government vision statement has continued, and indeed has become more prevalent. The association between e-government and the provision of government services, hinted at in earlier governmental discussions of e-government, has become considerably more explicit. At the most basic level, this change is reflected in the terminology being used. The Government appears to adopt a particular definition of democratic participation based primarily around the concept of "citizens as customers". This phrase in fact formed part of the title of a speech by the new Minister of State Services, Trevor Mallard, given around the time that the E-Government Unit was established, which explicitly linked the development of e-government to the promotion of this ideal. As Mallard said:

The words 'citizens as customers' pick up a major theme of the e-government initiative... it provides a focus on people and service. It's about utilising technological advances so that citizens get a better and easier service. (Mallard 2000c, pp. 1-2).

What then is the intended role of these citizens/consumers in an e-democracy? Given the rhetoric of participation discussed above, it seems somewhat incongruous that the public, elsewhere pictured as 'interactively consulting' with government or 'providing feedback on policy issues', is here described as merely the 'customers of government agencies'. The word 'customers' has obvious commercial/service connotations, far removed from concepts of community or political involvement. Democratic participation in government, which many expected to be so enhanced by the introduction of 'e-government', is in practice being defined as the exercise of consumer choices with regard to government services.

The section of the e-government strategy entitled "what e-government will look like" includes:

**Easy feedback to government**

Electronically delivered services will allow easy feedback on content, quality and satisfaction (SSC 2001a, p. 11).

Here online 'feedback' made possible by ICTs is conceived as a means of facilitating public input on the "content, quality and satisfaction" of government services. Similarly, the portal strategy overview states that government agencies will benefit from the new government portal in a variety of ways, one of which is "Customer Feedback"; the strategy expects that "the portal will provide a complimentary channel for customers to provide feedback to agencies... [that] will be a key forum for developing customer focused service delivery plans" (SSC 2001b, p. 16).

The government's plans for online community discussion also appear to be influenced by the managerial and consultative approaches to discussion and participation. The implementation plan notes that "the personalisation of services could also be used to provide a 'private chat-room' for enabling the formation of e-customer groups" (SSC 2001c, p. 24). The 'e-customer groups' are most obviously associated with access to government services and other commercial applications. While the primary focus of the Government's consultative initiatives is on encouraging participation in a isolated, individualistic model, in the e-community initiative online discussion appears to be intended to facilitate the organisation of online 'lobby groups', to provide feedback and opinion within the established policy-making framework. Political participation by these groups will remain focused on responding to government initiatives, and subject to the terms of debate set by the agencies. This model stands in marked contrast to hopes for reflexive interpersonal deliberation on political issues of the type hoped for by most participatory democrats, in which identities and inequalities remain bracketed and the focus is on rational discussion as opposed to the more or less organised voicing of mere opinion and interest.

In the portal strategy, the role of government in "enabl[ing] customer participation" is characterised as a measurable, deliverable service (SSC 2001b, p. 35, and SSC 2001c, p.

8). Online participation in government through the portal is to be measured quantitatively, primarily by:

- Volume (and %) of mail via the portal.
- Extent of changes to the portal from customer feedback...
- Volume (and percentage) of customer transactions via the portal.
- Volume of life-event triggered transactions via the portal (SSC 2001b, p. 35).

Here again the managerial approach to government, which focuses on efficiency and measurable, legally enforceable accountability as primary organisational goals, can be seen. The Government's desire to have measurable indicators of the success of the goal of 'participation', as dictated by the accountability requirements of the contractual relationships in government introduced in the public sector reforms, leads it to focus on easily measurable aspects of online participation. Some activities, such as the volume of transactions and e-mail produced through the portal, may be easily measured, and may thus be used to gauge a certain, quantitative form of success. However, these are not necessarily the most crucial elements of online participation in government.

In its plans to measure the success of the e-government portal in encouraging participation, the Government has chosen to focus primarily on feedback and participation related to 'customer transactions' with government. This is, however, an exceptionally limited definition of political participation, which overlooks any role for citizens in policy-making outside of limited, largely service-related areas of government agency activity. Moreover, participation in politics is not only important in a quantitative, measurable sense (Hacker 1996). In targeting easily identifiable and measurable aspects of democratic political participation for the purposes of accountability, the Government runs the risk of instituting a rigid, short-term, and potentially unenforceable approach to the evaluation of e-government<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> There is now an extensive literature that questions the validity of the commercial, contractual approach to accountability and efficiency in government. A full discussion of these issues is beyond the bounds of this thesis, but see for example Smith and Hague (eds.) 1971, Aharoni 1986, Kettle 1993, Boston (ed.) 1995, Harrison (ed.) 1995, McGuire 1995, Brehn and Gates 1997, Easton 1997 and Perri 6 and Kendall 1997.

This approach ignores complex and largely intangible, qualitative aspects of democratic participation, such as questions of deliberation, rights, legitimacy, distributive justice and social good (see Smith 1971, pp. 53-7, Aharoni 1986, pp. 123-6, Kettle 1993, p. 26, McGuire 1995, pp. 8, 16-7 and Shick 1998 pp. 2-6). These issues may be difficult to measure, and are therefore anathema to contractual approaches to bureaucratic accountability that are based on legally enforceable performance agreements (Smith 1971, pp. 34-9, Kettle 1993, pp. 26-9, 207-8 and Gregory 1995, pp. 61-5). Nonetheless, it is vital that these issues are seriously considered if hopes for online public participation in government are to have any chance of success.

Early in the e-government strategy, in a section entitled “Government’s Customers”, it states that:

*Customers of government agencies are mainly New Zealanders or businesses operating here and sometimes people or businesses from other countries.*

Customers of government agencies do not always have the same obligations or rights as customers of commercial organisations; they often have no choice. Dealing with the Inland Revenue Department, for example, is mandatory. People should, however, be able to expect the same levels of service and responsiveness from government agencies as they receive from commercial organisations. (SSC 2001a p. 5)

These statements echo similar discussions by the United States National Performance Review, as far back as 1993:

By ‘customer’ we do not mean ‘citizen’. A citizen can participate in democratic decision-making; a customer receives benefits from a specific service... In a democracy, citizens and customers both matter. But when they vote, citizens seldom have much chance to influence the behaviour of public institutions that directly affect their lives... It is a sad irony: citizens own their government, but private businesses they do not own work much harder to cater to their needs. (National Performance Review 1993, section five, 10-11)

In both cases, these arguments are influenced by economic theories of government and are intended to illustrate the inefficiency of government as compared to private businesses. However, in making this extremely common, yet highly questionable assertion (see for example Kettle 1993, pp. 29-35, 200-1), the US NPR extract inadvertently touches on an interesting point. Influenced by management theories of government, governments consider the public differently, depending on the nature of

each interaction with government. At the polls, members of the public act as the citizens of an area, but in their dealings with government agencies, they become 'customers'. As the NPR points out, in their guise as citizens, members of the public have little influence over how governmental agencies act; their only way to register their preferences is through the relatively blunt and indirect instrument of voting for politicians at an election<sup>54</sup>. Governments have generally approached this problem from the economic perspective, arguing that if government can be made to think and act as businesses do, it will work harder to meet the needs of its 'customers'. This has involved an increasing expansion of service-related concepts and practice into discussions of political issues, including online participation. Thus, even in discussions of online participation in government, the focus is on limited, targeted consultations with 'customers', aimed at improving the provision of government services (see Hague and Loader 1999, p. 12).

Against this service-focused, consultative approach to participation, an alternative approach to this issue also suggests itself. Where the bureaucracy treats members of the public as citizens, rather than 'customers', the public is able to participate in discussions about the means and ends of government services, rather than simply passively receive those services in the manner of a customer (Chadwick and May 2001, p. 18). As the New Zealand Government notes, unlike the customers of businesses, government's customers often have no other options in terms of alternative service provider, and are thus denied even the market mechanism of consumer choice, that of exit. However, governments have frequently ignored opportunities to further involve citizens in decision-making; even when public participation has been considered, as here in the New Zealand e-government literature, it is generally approached from a service-focused, managerial perspective.

None of this is to say that the Government has done nothing and has no plans to facilitate the online participation of citizens in politics. However, it is often unclear in Government's e-government literature, despite the general rhetoric of 'democracy' scattered throughout the document, to what extent the Government's position on e-government includes broader notions of democratic participation that incorporate public

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<sup>54</sup> For further discussion of this distinction, see Kurland 1996, p. 390.

involvement in decision making. Moreover, to the extent that the Government has focused on encouraging democratic participation in policy-making, the model of participation it has adopted has remained firmly 'consultative'.

## **2. Accountability, Legitimacy and the 'Spectacle' of Technological Politics: The Consultative and Deliberative Models of Online Public Discussion in Governmental Policy-Making**

Governments, particularly at the local level, have gradually begun to pay increasing attention to ICT as a means of encouraging public discussion of political issues. Governmental statements and literature have begun to draw on the language of deliberative political participation in outlining planned mechanisms of online public consultation. However, for all the rhetoric of participation, it would be unwise to adopt a complacent attitude towards the likelihood of developments in ICT encouraging the evolution of deliberative forms of democracy. While public discussion may increasingly become a feature of online government, governments are continuing to adopt an approach to online discussion based on limited, government-controlled, issue-specific consultations, aimed at using discussion as a further means of encouraging the communication of public opinion to government. Agenda setting and decision making power remains firmly in the hands of government, while there is an appearance that the public has effectively deliberated on the issues.

Once generally regarded as impractical in a governmental setting, except at the most local of levels, the deliberative participatory model has risen to prominence with the recent explosion of computer-networking technologies. The remarkable success of online news and discussion group networks based around electronic mail, such as ARPANET and particularly Usenet, followed by the development of the more flexible hypertext interface of the World Wide Web, has given new life to hopes that participatory forms of deliberative democracy will develop online. While the managerial and consultative models of online government have certainly been dominant, Chadwick and May (2001,

pp. 13-4) also identify an alternative, deliberative model (which they term 'participatory'), that focuses on providing an arena for online public deliberation on policy issues. This model of e-government draws more heavily on the deliberative strand of participatory democratic theory. In this model, government "assumes that while the state may facilitate political discussion and interaction, it is but one association among many in civil society" (Chadwick and May 2001, p. 14). The focus of this model is thus on widespread, multi-directional citizen-to-citizen deliberation as a primary end of democracy, against the managerial and consultative models' stress on vertical, citizen-to-government communication of opinion.

Most governments have been however been slow to encourage online deliberative participation. Even to the extent that public discussion has been incorporated into online decision-making, the goal of online consultation has been to facilitate greater public participation in policy making within established policy-making processes, acting either as isolated individuals or in organised lobbying groups (Chadwick and May 2001, pp. 13-4). The experience of the UK Online portal is instructive here; while the British government now provides a discussion forum on the UK Online Portal, the site managers have adopted a very active approach to censorship, and uptake of the facility has been slow. Moreover, while some governments have provided forums for public deliberation, these forums have for the most part been disconnected from policy-making processes. Space has been created for members the public to deliberate amongst themselves within a governmental context online, but governments themselves have generally been unwilling to extend or become involved in these deliberations (Lenk 1999). Public deliberation in these forums, while potentially beneficial, remains of limited political influence, and often appears somewhat purposeless. Governments have thus adopted a fragmented approach to public participation online, separating citizen-government consultations on particular policy issues from more general many-to-many citizen-citizen deliberations within public forums. Yet if public deliberation is to approach the models of participatory public deliberation imagined by democratic theorists, it will need to be incorporated more directly within decision-making procedures (Aikens 1999, Lenk 1999).

New Zealand governments, for all the talk of participation in policy-making contained in various government documents and statements, have to a large extent adopted the limited, consultative approach to online discussion in governmental consultations. In common with the vast majority of international government literature and practice, the New Zealand Government focuses predominantly on the value of ICT as a means of improving the operation of existing government structures and processes. To the extent that public discussion is a goal of e-government, that participation is approached as a means of improving consultation in limited issue-based interactions. While the government has often discussed participatory applications of ICT, and makes use of the language of deliberative democracy, government consultations do not appear to be intended to take place within a broader culture of widespread public involvement in politics and deliberation on political issues. The focus of the e-government portal remains heavily on the informational aspects of information and communications technologies, while the potential of ICT in encouraging interactive, politically-oriented public communication between government and its citizens, and among citizens themselves, is downplayed.

As previously discussed, there have been a small number of examples of local governments attempting to adopt this deliberative approach to online government, albeit with mixed success. While many governments have made use of a wide range of consultative methods beyond plebiscitary devices, some approaching the interactive, deliberative forms of communication hoped for by many commentators, the model of citizen-government interaction generally adopted has served to limit the scope of these applications (Chadwick and May 2001). Where public political discussion has occurred in a government setting, it has primarily taken the form of online debates between politicians involving structured public input and questioning, with discussion limited by the terms of debate set by government at the beginnings of the consultation. In many of the 'electronic village hall' discussions involving politicians and officials, questions from the public must be submitted and approved some time in advance, thus curtailing opportunities for genuine, open deliberation (Coleman 1999a, pp. 198-9). Control, for all the popular rhetoric of ICT as a democratising technology, and the evidence of online participation and interaction with the public, is thus kept firmly in the hands of



established power-holders, while policy decisions gain an added air of legitimacy from being aired in public 'debate'. As Brants et al. note:

Politics in this form remains more a model of convincing through the dissemination of information than of communication and discussion. Politicians [and bureaucrats] decide on the definition of the problem and the content of the message and thus strongly influence the direction of the outcome. (Brants et al. 1996, p. 237)

This legitimising role of public-government discussion in online consultations may account for a great deal of the governmental interest in deliberation, along with the ability of public feedback to potentially improve the efficiency of government processes. By facilitating structured public debates online, involving both government and citizens in an apparently open discussion on policy issues, government is able to give the appearance of openness and accountability by being seen to have passed policy through the mill of public opinion (Bellamy and Raab 1999, pp. 165-7). A high degree of governmental control of the process can be maintained, by vetting public questions and limiting the terms and process of debate, while policy gains the appearance of 'rationality' and a certain degree of legitimacy from a process of open public examination and discussion. Timothy Luke (1989, chapter 5) describes this process of broadcast public debate as contributing to the development of politics as a 'spectacle'. Luke argues that centralised, broadcast public debates involve merely the *representation* of participatory public debate through images, rather than a process in which the public as a whole is involved (see Luke 1989, p. 130-1). In Luke's words, "democracy is no longer lived fully by the entire citizenry, but it is increasingly represented meticulously in televised spectacles as if it were" (Luke 1989, p. 132). The lifeworld itself (in Habermas' terms), has become materialised and objectified, and "the memories of real democracy are played out in these television rituals" (Luke 1989, pp. 144-5, and see 131-43). The public sphere of political debate becomes a "constantly shifting mediascape", in which "signs and signalling replace political discourse" and political participation is "vicarious and remote", becoming akin to a consumer choice in which "one votes favourably for media products by purchasing them, extolling their virtues, or wearing their iconic packaging" (Luke 1989, p. 145).

Luke's account was written while the Internet was yet to emerge as a significant force, and is therefore directed at televised political debate. It could therefore be questioned as to what extent these arguments are applicable to newer web-based forms of political discussion and interaction. Many futurists would argue that the development of the Internet, with its focus on two-way, participatory communication and the consequent destruction of the distinction between participant and audience, will increasingly make such critical discussions of televised politics irrelevant (Bellamy and Raab 1999, pp. 168-9). Even with regard to televised politics, Luke may rather overstate his position; while he is highly critical of modern televised politics, questions regarding the effects of television on the political process, beneficial or otherwise, have long been hotly debated among political scientists and communications scholars<sup>55</sup>. While televised politics may indeed have some of the effects that Luke identifies, he overlooks the usefulness of television as a means of communicating important information and so stimulating discussion and critical thought among the audience (see Hagen 1997, Purcell 1997, Coleman 199a, Ray 1999). Television would therefore seem to have potentials for both the centralisation and decentralisation of power, and as is the case with any technology, oversimplification is dangerous.

However, this argument works both ways; it is equally dangerous to associate any move to online, Internet-based political debate with a movement towards participatory, deliberative democracy. While the technology may have changed in the case of webcast political debates involving politicians and officials, the format has changed little. The structure of these debates remains hierarchical, in the sense that for the most part public questions (from the online 'audience') are directed at a panel of political 'experts' or authority figures, who provide most of the discussion. Very rarely, if ever, do public debates involving government representatives either televised or on the web take a more open, multidirectional form, with the assembled group involved in participating in the

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<sup>55</sup> A discussion of the impacts that the emergence of television has had on democratic politics is unfortunately far beyond the bounds of this thesis. For a brief overview of this debate, see Borgmann (1984), Graber (1984), Beniger (1986), Abramson et al. (1988), Moran (1994), Grossman (1995), Blumler (1997), Hagen (1997) and Ray (1999).

course of debate as deliberative equals (Bellamy and Raab 1999, p. 161). As long as governments continue to approach participation and debate from a hierarchical, consultative perspective, expectations for the development of online politics in terms of encouraging widespread political engagement across society may go unfulfilled.

While online public discussion may become an increasingly common feature of governmental consultations with the public, the scope and nature of public involvement remains limited in the consultative approach to online participation. As noted, in this model communication is based on the transmission of opinion between citizen and government, rather than interactive questioning of means and ends based on reflexive interaction or deliberation; government may take note of citizen opinion and tailor its policies to suit the contributions of the public, but does not engage in broad deliberation as such. Opportunities for the airing of a wide range of opinions in an open, *public* manner are thus limited in this model, since communication is directed almost entirely *towards* government in the hope of improving policy outcomes for particular groups of society (Lenk 1999). Since online participation in government, whatever the form, so often takes place within in this hierarchically structured framework, it again remains questionable how effective online government consultations will be in engaging the interest and involvement of broad sections of the public. As Bimber (1998, pp. 154-8, see also Bellamy and Raab 1999 and Wilhelm 1999 and 2000) suggests, even to the extent that more widespread public interest in politics is successfully created online by consultative mechanisms, it is likely to be transitory, interest-group led, and directed most successfully at single high-profile political issues. This 'compartmentalisation' of politics, as social and political life is further fragmented along lines of interest (in both senses of the word), is generally regarded as detrimental to the development of political consciousness, co-operation and deliberation in the public sphere (Calhoun 1998). On the basis of current practice, the 'revolution' in popular political power many have imagined as being brought about by the development of these technologies thus seems a long way off (see Richard 1999).

Political power in the dominant governmental models of online communication remains firmly entrenched in the hands of established groups, while opportunities for interactive opinion formation and reflexive deliberation among citizens in a policy-making context continue to be restricted. Popular conceptions of ICT as a naturally levelling, democratising technology thus appear misjudged. Moreover, maintaining a focus on technology as a solution to problems of political (not to mention social and economic) inequality detracts from the development of other socially and politically based initiatives. Online forms of interaction may, as enthusiasts have repeatedly claimed, have benefits in encouraging discussion and debate about political issues. But the limitations of the space created by the mediation of technology must always be considered. The final section of this chapter will examine arguments regarding the nature of advanced ICTs themselves in political interactions, in terms of their potential to encourage online political discussion and the enhancement of democracy.

### **3. Advanced ICTs, Political Participation and the Quality of Online Interaction**

Against the hype of technology enthusiasts, many critics have questioned the quality and depth of online interaction, arguing that mediated communication in online discussion forums is inherently inferior to face-to-face, interpersonal deliberation (for example Winner 1996, Calhoun 1998, Baoill 2000). Many critics have questioned the ability of online, mediated communication to enable the development of responsible, co-operative, thoughtful forms of interaction. Critics have pointed particularly to the predominance of aggressive, dogmatic and partisan styles of online debate on political issues (see for example Dutton 1996, Pfaffenberger 1996, Phillips 1996, Wilhelm 1999, Baoill 2000). It has also often been noted that the majority of Internet traffic is concerned with entertainment and commercially oriented uses. They therefore argue that hopes for the development of online forms of deliberative democracy are therefore fundamentally misplaced; while ICTs may allow a greater number of people to participate in discussions, the quality of discussion limits the value of doing so. For the most part, these

critical authors therefore call for a renewed focus on local-level, community-based, face-to-face forms of political participation, against what they regard as a damaging and distracting focus on technology for its own sake (see Calhoun 1998).

The question of access to these online public deliberations is again important. Even to the extent governments are able to encourage members of the public to want to participate in policy deliberation online, and provide access to the necessary ICTs, there remain issues about the nature of online participation that may inhibit the effective participation of many. This is particularly true since the form and nature of online discussions can also discourage participation from some groups; some styles of discussion predominate, styles often associated with male patterns of interaction. As a result, women participate at significantly lower levels in most online discussion forums on political issues, often seeking to establish women-only discussion groups (Tambini 1998). As Dahlberg notes:

The male style is characterised by messages that are longer and more frequent, issue oriented, assertive, authoritative, adversarial, sarcastic, and self-promoting. The female-gendered style tends to be shorter, personally-oriented, questioning, tentative, apologetic, and supportive. (Dahlberg 2000, p. 11)

Online discussions are often consistently dominated by a relatively small number of participants, which can discourage other, less experienced users from participating (Dutton 1996). As Dahlberg (2000, p. 11) notes, “those with the most time and skills and the ‘right’ culture to participate often end up dominating online forums.” Inexperienced users, members of minority groups, the elderly, and those who do not speak English well (or at all) also tend to find participation in online discussion difficult. Online communication, it is often argued, fails to effectively facilitate the creation of bonds of mutual trust, belonging, commitment and co-operation characteristic of face-to-face, localised deliberative political participation (Mansbridge 1980, Beniger 1986, Winner 1996, Calhoun 1998). So, Bimber (1998, p. 151) states that “online communication serves to insulate speakers from the consequences of their words and actions. Absent the normative force of face-to-face contact, it is not at all clear that the same degree of empathy, avoidance of conflict and other mechanisms of social pressure exist.”

While critics have raised powerful concerns about the depth and quality of online debate, there is some evidence that ICT can be applied in a manner conducive to effective political discussion (see Purcell 1997, Mukerji and Simon 1998, Coleman 1999a). As Dutton (1996, pp. 284-5) notes, many of these problems plague all attempts at political deliberation, regardless of the setting, but may be exacerbated by the particular nature of current patterns of online culture and techniques of ICT-based interaction. While the freedom of a certain degree of anonymity available online may contribute to the predominance of a quite aggressive, reactive style of discussion, the form, content and fundamental characteristics of political debate either online or offline may not be much different. Furthermore, there is the possibility that the style of online debate will soften as use of advanced ICTs gradually broadens and different societal groups begin to slowly participate. This argument has been relied upon too heavily by ICT enthusiasts, and has been used to deflect legitimate concerns about equal access and the nature of online culture, but nonetheless has some strength.

The enormous number of discussion groups across cyberspace, for all their weaknesses and often anarchic nature, have been somewhat successful in providing forums where unmediated, public political debate can be carried out (Dutton 1996, Phillips 1996, Mukerji and Simon 1998, Jordan 1999). Moreover, in many cases, online government discussion forums have met with a certain degree of success, particularly at the local level. A number of studies of participatory networks have found that online public discourse in a governmental setting can have significant benefits, both in encouraging participation among members of the public, and in providing a forum for involving, independent, reflexive public discussion about political issues (for example, Dutton 1996, Van Tassel 1996, Tambini 1998, Feenberg 1999, Locke 1999, Dahlberg 2000).

Governmentally provided discussion forums, as opposed to other groups within the wider Internet universe, may be particularly effective in focusing debate on political issues and maintaining a meaningful and engaged level of discourse (Dahlberg 2000, pp. 4-6). These more targeted spaces may be able to produce more considerate and thoughtful debate on policy issues, particularly compared to more anarchic public spaces such as Usenet

(Dutton 1996, Dahlberg 2000, p. 7). By targeting online deliberations towards issues relevant to a geographically-specific area, government-sponsored deliberations could potentially begin to meet the conditions of publicity and bracketed identity called for in theories of rational, deliberative decision-making. Despite their limitations, online forums of public debate, particularly where managed and supported by government, may therefore potentially go at least some way towards replicating 'town-hall' style public deliberations, as envisaged by ICT enthusiasts. It is certainly a simplification to write off ICT as a whole as being of no value in encouraging political involvement and deliberation.

For all the current focus on advanced forms of ICT in encouraging political participation and debate, the experience of a number of less technologically ambitious projects is instructive. For many years numerous public television networks around the world have served an important need, facilitating public access to political information and communication (Schickler 1994, Brants et al. 1996)<sup>56</sup>. The fact that television is primarily used as a mass medium for the vertical communication of popular entertainment speaks only a little about the nature of the medium, and a great deal about the economic and political structures that determine its use (Schickler 1994, Schultz 1994, Nye 1997). Moreover, several commentators have argued that the focus on more advanced, computer-based communications technologies in Western nations detracts from the value of other, less expensive ICT applications. For instance, Okunna notes the growing importance of VCR and cassette tapes as small, decentralised participatory media in developing nations, "providing an effective way of bringing groups of people together to tackle community problems" (Okunna 1995, p. 619). Community radio programming has also performed a similar function in numerous developing countries (Fisher 1990, White 1990, Huesca 1995). These small-scale, relatively unsophisticated initiatives have in many ways met with considerably more success than more ambitious attempts to

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<sup>56</sup> See also Purcell (1997) for discussion of the community-building functions of television and other mass-media. Coleman (1999a) also discusses the often-overlooked potential of interactive forms of broadcast television as a means of encouraging political awareness, involvement and participation.

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introduce advanced technologies (Hall 1998). In these examples, supposedly hierarchical technologies have been applied in a participatory form, helping to overcome the lack of technological sophistication of developing countries, and making use of technology as a support for participatory social processes and collective action rather than as an end in of itself (see Purcell 1997).

There is therefore some justification for cautious hope that ICTs could potentially be used for the benefit of deliberative participation in politics. ICTs are certainly not the cure-all for democracy that many enthusiasts have claimed them to be, but nor does the proliferation of advanced ICTs necessarily spell doom for careful, considered political debate and engaged, concerned political community. The evidence suggests that ICTs have potential applications in both directions. However, whether or not cyberspace comes to be used as an effective means of encouraging deliberation in political decision-making will to a certain extent depend on the approach to online democracy taken by governments. As we have seen, on the evidence thus far, both in New Zealand and around the world, ICT enthusiasts appear to have rather overstated their case.

## V. CONCLUSION

ICT enthusiasts have had high hopes for the potential of online discussion to increase the equality and effectiveness of public political participation. To the extent that the fulfilment of these hopes depends on the actions of government, however, the evidence thus far does not give cause for great optimism. New Zealand governments, in common with most major governments around the world, have not had the promotion of online political discussion as a primary goal of their ICT projects. Moreover, while there are some signs that this may be beginning to change, governments have generally approached public discussion as another tool by which the legitimacy and effectiveness of governmental decisions may be enhanced. Public participation in general has thus tended to be directed at making targeted improvements to the provision of government services, rather than widespread involvement in policy making.

While there are reasonable arguments that online discussion may, in concert with other forms of participation both online and offline, contribute to the enhancement of democracy, too strong a focus on the ability of ICTs themselves to bring about the evolution of online participatory democracy appears unjustified. As long as governments continue to make use of political discussion in a restricted, hierarchical manner, while more public, open and deliberative forms of discussion remain cut off from actual decision-making processes, the benefits of online politics appear unlikely to live up to the more optimistic assessments of the potential of ICT in democratic politics.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSION: ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY AND E-GOVERNMENT IN THEORY AND PRACTICE**

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Hopes that democracy will be enhanced through the use of information and communications technologies, and fears that these technologies spell ruin for democratic community, have existed as long as the technologies themselves. With the success of advanced computer networking technologies and the enormous expansion of the Internet, along with the recent growth of governmental online activity, both optimists and pessimists have felt their causes strengthened. However, this thesis has argued that in many ways both of these perspectives miss the point. Both optimistic and pessimistic theories focus to a large extent on the technologies themselves, at the expense of a fuller understanding of the structures that influence the effects of those technologies. With regard to ICT and democracy, there are potential applications enabling a variety of forms of democratic participation, and thus supporting different models of online democracy and interaction. There is no single model of online democratic participation that ICTs can be said to encourage; instead, there are forces working in a number of potentially contradictory directions, based on the uses to which ICT is being put by different groups.

#### **II. GOVERNMENTAL ICT PROGRAMMES AND THE POTENTIAL OF ICT FOR DEMOCRATIC POLITICS: SOME CONCLUSIONS**

For all the potential of ICT in encouraging political participation and new forms of interaction, the focus of some democratic theorists on advanced technological solutions to these political issues seems a mistake. In common with traditional optimistic Western

attitudes to technology, many commentators have focused on advanced ICTs as potential means of overcoming imbalances of political power and creating the means of establishing an effective public voice in policy-making. Indeed, the evidence suggests that certain applications of ICTs may indeed have value in enabling democratic participation, particularly by overcoming problems in gaining access to policy-making (though as we have seen ICTs often create their own access problems and inequalities that in turn need to be overcome).

However, on the evidence presented in this thesis there is no reason to assume that any particular structural characteristics of these technologies will inevitably lead to the widespread use of deliberative models of online interaction in a governmental policy-making setting. Technology alone is unlikely to reduce the influence of established intermediaries in the political process in favour of a more active and involved public; news organisations, interest groups, political parties and other organisational elites are likely to remain a feature of political life. Indeed, in many ways these established groups also benefit greatly from advanced ICTs, in terms of their enabling of more effective management, communication and co-ordination within large organisations. While governments have frequently indicated a commitment to encouraging democratic processes online, making use of the language of democratic participation, the approaches they have taken have usually fallen some way short of facilitating participatory democracy of the sort generally envisaged.

New Zealand governments in general have based their e-government initiatives primarily on 'managerial' models of online government, in which government adopts a leading, regulatory role, and ICT is used principally as a means of improving governmental efficiency and providing government information and services to citizens. To the extent that encouraging citizen interaction with government is a goal, the focus has been on ensuring more convenient access to government services through the use of 'one-stop shop' government portals and on encouraging 'customer feedback' so as to enable the more effective targeting of service delivery.

While the use of ICTs in a managerial model of interaction may have important benefits in terms of improving the organisational efficiency of government operations<sup>57</sup>, this is an extremely narrow approach to the role of government. While efficiency is clearly an important goal of any organisation, in government in particular it is far from the only important consideration. Democratic participation itself is an inefficient form of decision-making, particularly where it involves a degree of debate on policy issues, but a case for democracy is generally made on grounds other than simple efficiency. The influence of a managerial focus on efficiency and service provision in governmental ICT programmes is thus discouraging from the perspective of hopes for the development online democracy.

As we have seen, governments in New Zealand and internationally have repeatedly drawn on the language and concepts of participatory democratic theory in 'electronic government'. Governments point to online policy consultation with the public as a major advance in its relations with citizens. Recognising the limitations of the mere provision of information and services online, many governments hope to provide the public as a whole with more channels by which it may gain access to government policy-making processes. By creating more opportunities for actual public participation in the political system through e-mail-based, linear transmission of public 'preferences' to government and online plebiscites, many governments hope to overcome negative attitudes to politics and so encourage the participation of those who would not normally do so. However, the consistent adoption of commercial terminology in these governmental discussions of participation raises questions about the nature of this commitment. Moreover, there are a number of reasons to doubt that increased online consultation of the form adopted by most governments will meet the expectations of many commentators in overcoming long-standing barriers to equal access.

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<sup>57</sup> Even this argument is based on a high degree of speculation. This issue is beyond the bounds of this thesis, but it would certainly be unwise to simply assume that attempts to introduce widespread ICT use to government operations will lead to significant efficiency gains and cost cuts. Given the significant costs of upgrading and maintaining technology, retraining staff and reorganising processes within entrenched bureaucracies, any efficiency gains and budget savings to be had from a major modernisation initiative would seem likely to be rather long-term in their realisation.

Consultative models of interaction between citizen and government assume that the simple provision of more channels of access to current governmental processes will be enough to encourage broader participation. Yet as Kenneth Hacker (1996, p. 214) notes, studies indicate that “citizens want changes in the quality of political communication, not just in its quantity.” There is considerable evidence that improvements in the quality of opportunities for interactive participation in political issues will be crucial if low levels of public interest and trust in politics and government are to be overcome. Yet in consultative models of online government, political participation remains largely disconnected from meaningful communication about political issues. To the extent that political deliberation is a feature of online consultation, it remains in a hierarchical form based in the central authority of government, and thus further contributes to the construction of deliberative democracy as a managed ‘spectacle’ rather than a means of encouraging meaningful, open, broad-based public debate. Yet to the extent that this is, or should be, a goal of governmental ICT projects, alternative applications of ICT may therefore be required.

### **III. DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This thesis has shown that governments in New Zealand have primarily adopted a conservative, ‘managerial’ approach to ICT-based interaction with the public. The international evidence suggests that this model of e-government has been dominant, though a number of local community-based initiatives have attempted to develop more active, participatory models of online politics. It is interesting to note that despite New Zealand’s small population, comparable to that of many of the cities hosting participatory civic networks, the New Zealand Government has been most obviously influenced by the e-government projects of larger central governments such as the United States and particularly Britain. The local governments of dispersed areas within New Zealand have also tended to adopt a narrow, information-focused approach to their ICT projects. It is an important question, deserving of further research, as to the conditions under which governments adopt particular models of online government. To what extent does the

established approach to public management adopted within a particular state influence the direction of e-government initiatives in terms of the models of interaction adopted? In New Zealand, the dominance of the established commercial model of public management appears to have limited the scope of the e-government initiative in adopting a more participatory model of online citizen-government interaction.

The participatory local civic networks established in a number of centres around the world may provide a starting point for the development of more deliberative forms of online participation in democracy. However, even those governments that have begun to move towards the adoption of a deliberative model of online democracy have for the most part done so in a rather inconsistent, patchy fashion. Often, governmentally-provided forums for discussion and debate among citizens themselves remain to a large degree disconnected from policy-making, and hierarchical, consultative models of citizen-government interaction remain prevalent. Many participatory governmental ICT projects are however in their early stages of development, which raises a number of important questions:

How quickly do governmental ICT programmes move between different models of online participation, and under what circumstances? What are the most effective mechanisms by which online participation may be encouraged? How should government respond to online public feedback? What sorts of deliberative mechanisms should governments adopt in their ICT projects? How should government approach the use of online deliberative mechanisms? How should public servants contribute to the discussions? How successful are deliberative mechanisms in encouraging long-term citizen participation and engagement? What are the roles for the media and political organisations within deliberative forms of participation?

There are few available answers to these questions at this point, and there is thus room for a great deal of further research in this area (see Richard 1999, p. 85 for further research directions). Kenneth Hacker's list of necessary conditions for a general model of

online political activity (albeit focused on US conditions) they may constitute a valuable beginning:

1. Total connectivity of citizens through either private, publicly provided or universally available public access connections.
2. Interactivity of citizens, government officials, academics and agency experts and journalists.
3. Publicly provided training for citizens in how to use CMC.
4. Regulation and limitation of commercial colonisation of the Internet.
5. Creation of electronic government task forces involving citizens who are not part of electronic or political elite circles of influence.
6. Connections of virtual democracy to material democracy such that virtual discussions and interactivity lead to concrete actions taken by government.
7. Lateral expansion of networks of citizens and experts who contribute to ideas about how to design and improve the NII and GII.
8. A replacement of vertical communication structures (experts in the White House getting messages, sending out messages) with a horizontal communication structure (two-way message exchange between citizens and leaders, not only host computer programs or form letters with laser-printed Presidential signatures. (Hacker 1996, pp. 229-30)

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This thesis has found that the popular, deterministic reliance on technological solutions alone in bringing about political change in the direction of democracy or equality is not supported by the evidence of governmental ICT projects, in New Zealand at least. In accordance with other major international governmental initiatives, New Zealand governments have for the most part adopted a managerial approach to online government, which seems likely to be of limited value in promoting interactive democratic forms of public political participation. The development of such forms of popular political participation may perhaps be encouraged online, both inside and outside of governmental settings, but technology alone will not bring about the development of effective deliberative democracy, or act as a complete substitute for interpersonal organisation and interaction. Moreover, advanced ICTs have a number of limitations in terms in their ability to overcome important cultural and attitudinal barriers to public access to government. The evidence presented in this thesis suggests that the chances of success in both the analysis and practical application of ICT in democratic politics will be greatly improved where they consider these limitations, and develop strategies incorporating



technology not as an end in itself, but as part of broader, more balanced and sophisticated approaches.

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