IEG
INSTITUTE FOR ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT

e-Democracy:
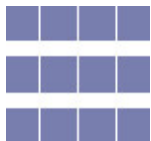## *Putting Down Global Roots*

Janet Caldow

Director

Institute for Electronic Government, IBM

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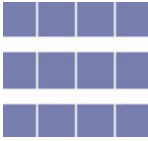# e-Democracy:
Putting Down Global Roots

By Janet Caldow

Ask any farmer. It's one thing to sow seed, but quite another to nurture thousands upon thousands of seedlings, row upon row, so they put down strong roots and produce a high-yield crop. Although some governments have sown the first few e-democracy seeds, an abundant harvest seems elusive and distant at best. Don't blame technology. Today's (even yesterday's) technology can electronically support virtually every aspect of democracy. And don't blame lack of funds. The marginal cost of incorporating e-democracy initiatives into an e-gov technology infrastructure is insignificant. What's missing is statesmanship and the resolve to nurture the first e-democracy seedlings whose mature fruits can sustain the next generation. As governments achieve more and more sophisticated levels of e-government, such as online citizen services, strategy should include a companion progression to more and more sophisticated levels of e-democracy within and beyond national borders.

Webster's defines **democracy** as *"a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation."* Putting an "e" in front of democracy means nothing more than using information technology tools to facilitate, improve and ultimately extend the exercise of democracy.

E-democracy has both a tactical side and a strategic side. On the tactical side, information technology has advanced communication and the access to information arguably better than any known medium. But something even more fundamental is at hand. The underlying core principle of democracy is an informed and engaged citizenry. Most governments get passing marks for "informing" citizens via digital communication. But the vast majority have a long way to go to "actively engage" citizens or to effectively exert global influence using digital media.   These elements comprise the most overlooked dimension of e-democracy – the strategic side. How can a government use digital media to both actively engage citizens and advance its public policies to the world community?

Engaging your "own" citizens or constituents through digital media includes enhancing active participation in law-making, policy-making, and legislative process, all of which are influenced by a variety of forces— public opinion, debate, lobbyists, special interest groups, consultation with constituents, committee hearings, and expert testimony. The regulatory

process (subsequent to enactment of law) follows many of the same communicative and collaborative patterns as law making. Lest we not forget, the ability to leverage digital technology by political parties, campaigns and candidates is also part of the equation. Voter registration, election or referenda voting, and on-going communication between constituents and their elected representatives are equally integral to e-democracy.

Despite an increasingly digital world, attention must be directed toward the digital divide. A 2002 national survey in India revealed that fewer than one percent of adults had used the Internet in the preceding three months. In response, a growing national network of owner-operated computer centers has emerged that may eventually serve up to 700 million people in 600,000 rural villages. Village entrepreneurs who provide cybercafé services tap into wireless technology through India's fiber-optic network which reaches 85 percent of the country, compensating for the lack of access to telephone land lines. For small fees, citizens can access government officials, records and online medical consultations. Other services already include education, commerce, and participatory democracy.[1]

The Internet has greatly lowered the costs of transmitting information, enabling people to bypass traditional intermediaries whose power revolved around the control of information: national governments, the diplomatic corps and transnational corporations, among others. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), ethnic communities, individuals, and, yes, even terrorists, use the Internet to create global platforms and political influence.

There is a huge difference between information/communication within one's own borders and winning the hearts and minds of those in other cultures. Affecting world opinion through information technology may not be as obvious, but has far-reaching implications. The Aspen Institute defines "Netpolitik" as the exploitation of powerful Internet capabilities to shape politics, culture, values, personal identity…and public perception." They further define "soft power" as how a government uses persuasion, public information, education, communications, culture, trade, aid, investment and marketing to secure public support of its interests, values and policies.[2]

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[1] Lancaster, John. "Village Kiosks Bridge India's Digital Divide." *The Washington Post* 13 Oct. 2003: 1

[2] Bollier, David. "The Rise of Netpolitik: How the Internet is Changing International Politics and Diplomacy." The Aspen Institute, 2003
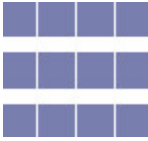
As parties to the democratic process, all government entities (international bodies, governments, political parties, elected representatives) need to urgently develop new and effective public and global communication skills using digital media.

As the former U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright and Robert Hormats, vice chairman of Goldman Sachs and a former top official at the State Department and Office of the U.S. Trade Representative noted at the 2003 Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program Roundtable, it's not just the volume of information it's also the velocity of information. In the past, "…diplomatic communications were carried on through predictable venues and stable deliberative processes. The circle of knowledgeable participants was well established. The number of participants with access to accurate, timely information was relatively small." Not anymore. With CNN and the Internet, coupled with privatization of mass communications, the sheer volume and speed of information forces instant reaction and decision-making. Governments can no longer rely solely on formal intelligence reports, diplomatic cables and in-house experts. Survival dictates a strategy to effectively influence input into digital media channels and dynamically monitoring and interpreting digital output of other entities.[4]

> *In virtually every communication medium, content can become separated from context—cultural, social, economic and political. This is a significant hurdle, particularly true of the Internet. For effective messaging, government entities need to develop a new set of communication skills to overcome 'decontextualization' on the Internet. Elizabeth Monk Daley, dean of the University of South California's School of Cinema-Television, illustrates this phenomenon with the following story. A documentary filmmaker went to a popular Japanese bar where American westerns are frequently shown. She asked the audience why they enjoyed the films. After all, American westerns are all about the rugged individuals standing against society, and Japan is a society built on consensus. But the Japanese audience responded, "You don't understand your own films. They are about consensus around the campfire."[3]*
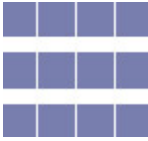
e-Democracy Models

Academics and others are beginning to explore models of e-democracy. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) defines three types of e-democracy interaction – one-way information provision; a two-way relationship where citizens have opportunity to give feedback on issues; and, finally, a partnership relationship whereby citizens are actively engaged in policymaking. Similarly, Coleman and Gotze suggest four scenarios.[5] The first is technology supporting direct democracy. The second encompasses online grass-roots civic communities of interest. The third addresses online surveys and opinion

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[3] Bollier, David. "The Rise of Netpolitik: How the Internet is Changing International Politics and Diplomacy." The Aspen Institute, 2003
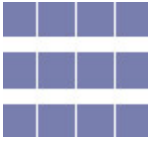
[4] Ibid

[5] Coleman, Stephen and John Gotze, "Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation," Hansard Society: 5
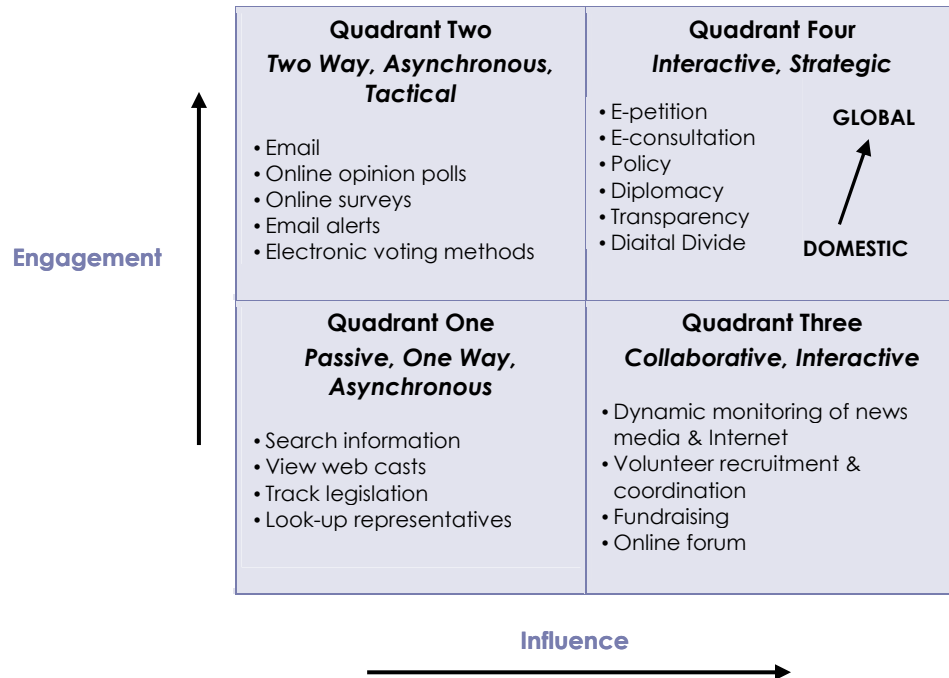
polls. The fourth points to technology as a way to engage citizens in policy deliberation. Gartner Dataquest has developed a four-stage model of "e-development" which applies to citizen services as well as e-democracy. In the first stage (presence) the Internet site provides information online in a static format. In the second stage (interaction) citizens search information, download forms, or access links to other relevant sites. The third stage (transaction) alleviates the need to complete a transaction by mail or make an office visit. The fourth stage is transformational. Some attributes of this stage are wireless access, enabling sites to push government information to citizens and robust customer relationship management (CRM) tools. Inherent in this stage is a redesign of workflow and processes.

Consensus is clearly beginning to emerge, at least regarding e-democracy as it affects citizen engagement within borders. Progression is toward facilitating proactive citizen engagement that can influence and improve policy making—not simply another form of citizen communication. However, these models fall far short of a strategic vision of e-democracy.

The Institute for Electronic Government's model takes a leap forward in both the definition and implementation of e-democracy (See Figure 1). The IEG model is not limited to the citizen-to-government point of view, mapping progression from an informed to an engaged citizenry. It also serves as a scorecard of digital savvy—how successfully a government entity interprets and responds to the digital world and exploits technology accordingly to advance influence.   That 'entity' might be an elected representative, a legislative body, a provincial or national government, a political party, or international organization. The model helps leaders think through how to fold both tactical and strategic e-democracy efforts into an overall e-government strategy. With one glance, a government can identify its current position against characteristics at various sophistication levels and see what e-initiatives can take them to the next level. One axis measures the degree of engagement. The other axis measures influence.

e-Democracy Model
Institute for Electronic Government

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Quadrant Two
Two Way, Asynchronous, Tactical
 	
• Email
• Online opinion polls
• Online surveys
• Email alerts
• Electronic voting methods
	Quadrant Four
	Interactive, Strategic
	
	• E-petition
	• E-consultation
	• Policy
	• Diplomacy
	• Transparency
	• Digital Divide **GLOBAL**
	       ↗
	     DOMESTIC

Quadrant One *Passive, One Way, Asynchronous* • Search information • View web casts • Track legislation • Look-up representatives	**Quadrant Three** *Collaborative, Interactive* • Dynamic monitoring of news media & Internet • Volunteer recruitment & coordination • Fundraising • Online forum

Engagement ↑

Influence →

Quadrant One

Most government entities—governments, legislative bodies, international organizations, political parties—have done a pretty good job of making information available online. That's a fundamental step in e-democracy tactics. According to the recent Pew Foundation's Internet & American Life Project (April, 2002):

- 68 million Americans visited a website, up from 40 million in just twelve months.
- 42 million Americans used government web sites to research public policy issues
- 23 million Americans have used the Internet to send comments to public officials about policy choices.
- 13 million Americans participate in online lobbying
- 14 million have used government Web sites to gather information to help them decide how to cast their votes. 13 million have participated in online lobbying campaigns.

Legislatures have begun to understand not only how to use technology to communicate with constituents but how to operate as modern businesses
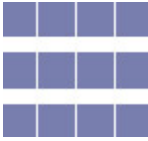
exploiting technology. Evidence of the growing awareness and importance of technology, the Council of State Governments reports that over the past four years thirty four U.S. states have provided laptops or PCs in legislative chambers linking representatives to party leadership, to legislative systems, and to their constituencies. Many regularly web cast and archive proceedings.

Despite all best efforts, remaining in Quadrant One for very long severely limits capacity to influence and engage.

Quadrant Two

Entities in this quadrant have made great strides to open two-way communication. Let's look at this from the citizens' point of view. Who exactly is "*the government*" anyway? As they say in the film, Ghostbusters, "Who you gonna call?" Is it the city councilman or mayor? The appointed school board member? Maybe the governor. Could it be a state legislator, Member of Parliament, the Chair of a Senate Sub Committee?   Is it a county or federal agency? Is it 10 Downing, the White House? Increasingly, is it the European Union or the United Nations?

The correct answer, of course, is "all of the above." We are citizens of towns, cities, states, provinces, countries and, yes, the world. That's the challenge. Every public institution and those who serve in them are obliged to move beyond information dissemination to open two-way communication channels relevant to the digital age in which we live.

Although entities in Quadrant Two may have achieved two-way capability, its nature is still largely asynchronous. The Congressional Management Foundation reports that in 2001, United States Senate offices received as many as 55,000 emails a month. Some congressional offices report that up to 60% of all correspondence is through email. Even so, the report notes 75% of House members respond to constituent email with postal letters!

The M.I.T. Artificial Intelligence Laboratory has explored managing public access and participation via the Internet in government inquiry and regulatory processes. Because the Internet broadens and cheapens access to these processes, it can dramatically increase the number of responses to proposals. Fighting fire with fire, overload can be addressed using a variety of technologies to manage technology – such as software to sort and respond to email.
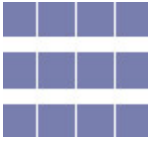
Inviting citizens to sign up for email alerts on various issues is one proactive communication strategy & reduces the volume of unnecessary individual email. Many times a citizen just wants to tell government what they think, not necessarily expecting a response. For example, U.S. Senator Don Nickles (R-OK) reduces unnecessary e-mail volume on hot topics through a pre-emptive strategy. "You Called It," is an innovative feature on his Web site that lists the top five issues constituents contacted him on in the past week and his position on each. This way, constituents who want to know the Senator's view don't have to contact the office— it's easily found on his home page.[6]

As one of its Homeland Security initiatives, Arlington County, Virginia launched a citizen emergency alert system (www.arlingtonalert.com) to contact residents in the event of an emergency. The system sends alerts, updates, and notifications to ALL of a citizen's listed devices and email accounts, including cell phones, pagers, Blackberries, or other PDAs. Messages are sent in English or Spanish. During the regional Hurricane Isabel emergency and resulting widespread power outages, use of this communication tool skyrocketed.

The City of Fairfax, Virginia, has an extensive e-message alert system for both emergency and non-emergency communication. The City pushes information to registered citizens (by either email or phone) including reminders of property tax due dates, road closures, school closings, city events, and weather alerts.

The town of Issy-les-Moulineaux, near Paris, regularly polls a representative sample of 650 residents online on a variety of local issues – public safety, schools, and urban development. This consultation must now precede any major local project and gives the Town Council a tool to help in decision-making.

Quadrant Three

This quadrant extends interactive capability. Although still largely asynchronous, communication begins to evolve into collaboration. Most visible in this stage are political players and the electoral process with tactics such as recruiting and organizing volunteers online, online fundraising, campaigning, communication with constituents and the media, voter registration and voting.

In the United States, over three thousand counties currently deploy voting at over 200,000 polling sites. Technologies range from punch cards,

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[6] "E-mail Overload in Congress: Managing a Communications Crisis." A Report of the Congress Online Project. Congressional Management Foundation and George Washington University. Funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts
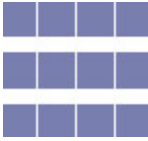
optical scanning, lever, direct recording electronics, to paper ballots. Many of these are aging or obsolete systems. Few, if any, standards exist, even within states. Numerous countries have employed various forms of new electronic voting methods at both the polling place and outside the polling place, most notably Brazil, Australia, the UK, and Switzerland. These initiatives include touchscreen voting machines, interactive voice response (IVR) technology, PC-based systems, public kiosks, interactive digital TV, and voting using handheld mobile devices via short message service. However, these electronic voting devices have had their share of controversy, including questionable auditability, accountability, reliability, recount capability, and lack of permanent records or uniform standards. Very few governments have ventured past the pilot stage of voting over the Internet. In January, 2003, the small Swiss village of Anieres outside Geneva held its first legally binding Internet vote.

The collection and counting of votes is only one part of the challenge. Many times, changes made to traditional voter registration systems (such as address changes) are not processed in time for election day. Redundant voter data may exist in several locations within a state (if voter moves). These are straightforward technology issues—database design and integration—relatively easy and inexpensive to correct.

Quadrant Four

Domestic Citizen Engagement

Managing the policy making process is not unlike managing product life cycle. The earlier in the policy making cycle, the more likely citizens can influence the outcome. The Hansard Society in the UK contends that mechanisms for promoting public deliberation and embedding it within the constitutional process and demonstrating real links between public input and policy outcomes need to be devised. They highlight five reasons for governments to do so: (1) improve the quality of policy by tapping wider sources of expertise under conditions of increasing complexity; (2) prepare for greater and faster interactions demanded by information society; (3) integrate public input into policy making; (4) respond to calls for transparency and accountability; (5) strengthen trust in government.[7]

Quadrant Four represents the highest level of e-democracy sophistication at least for the foreseeable future – strategic, interactive, synchronous, and global in nature. Democratic institutions should at least actively pilot initiatives in these areas now. If there is any doubt that leading-edge

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[7] Coleman, Stephen, Nicola Hall, et. al. "Hearing Voices: The Experience of Online Public Consultations and Discussion in UK Governance." Nov. 2002
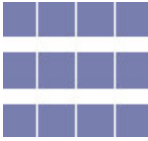
governments are already exploiting technology to gather input from citizens and businesses to subsequently determine a course of action accordingly, one only needs to visit a few sites to identify this trend.
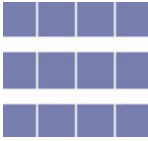
On the Queensland, Australia website (www.qld.gov.au) citizens have an impressive array of opportunities to interact with the government. The "Get Involved With Government" choice links citizens to their representatives, to Queensland agencies, and to Parliament.

The 'Queensland Agencies' link gives citizens background information on an issue, current law or proposed legislation and invites direct citizen comments which goes to committee and then eventually to Parliament to help formulate policies and standards on a variety of legislative issues. The 'Queensland Parliament' link empowers a citizen to make a formal, direct request to Parliament in the form of an e-petition with the object of "persuading Parliament to take some particular action." Citizens can also review existing e-petitions and add their own signatures in a show of support, or express their objections. The site also surveys users about the e-petition process itself—a built-in quality control & improvement mechanism. Likewise, the Scottish Parliament was an early innovator in e-petitioning.

Citizens can create an e-petition or comment or add their support to an existing e-petition—all electronically (www.scottish.parliament.uk/e-petitions/index.htm). The International Teledemocracy Centre, founded in 1999 by Scotland's Napier University and BT Scotland aims to develop and apply advanced information and communication technology to enhance and support the democratic decision-making process. Their mission includes:

- Promoting the application of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) by governments and parliaments worldwide in order that elected members and supporting staff can conduct their
- business more effectively and efficiently.
- Demonstrating how technology can contribute to more openness and accessibility in government.
- Encouraging and assisting the public, voluntary organizations and business to participate in government through the use of technology.

In 2001 the European Commission adopted an "Interactive Policy Making" (IPM) project to improve the European Union's governance. Through its website, "Your Voice in Europe" (http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice), the IPM collects and analyzes citizen and business input to evaluate existing EU policies and to solicit consultations on new initiatives. The purpose is to make EU policy-making more transparent,

comprehensive and effective, giving stakeholders an active role in the policy making process.

Global Positioning of Democracy

The focus of most e-democracy efforts to date have been largely directly internally to stakeholders, a jurisdiction or a domestic audience. That is clearly appropriate to communicate and engage citizens. On the other hand, the Internet knows no borders and harbingers of change are emerging.

In 2001, Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi launched the "Koizumi Cabinet Mail Magazine." This email magazine is distributed weekly from his office to explain his policy positions. More than two million subscribers now participate. For the anniversary celebration of the 100th edition, twenty subscribers were selected by lottery to meet in person with the prime minister to discuss a broad range of issues.   Although only available in Japanese at this time, the email magazine initiative is an intriguing step toward a more strategic view of e-democracy that extends beyond Japan's borders.

Canada gets high marks for effectively advancing its public policies to a global audience (www.canada.gc.ca).   This site probably represents early state-of-the-art in terms of explicitly expressing Canada's perspective on a variety of world issues directed to *non-Canadians*. Canada's website has a link for 'Non-Canadians' where people can further link to 'Canada and the World.' Here, content ranges from Canada's view on foreign policy, such as peacekeeping and counter terrorism, to the country's position on humanitarian aid, arms control, science and technology.

There are countless international websites for indigenous peoples, activist groups, grassroots organizations, and others who employ a variety of influence techniques ranging from information portals to activism. Government entities have a lot to learn from these early adopters to advance domestic and foreign affairs, enhance security, and promote democracy.

The ABCs of e-Democracy

Accountability
Bills, ballots
Consultation, community
Discussion, diplomacy
Email, e-petitions
Feedback, forums
Governance
Homeland Security alerts
Information, interaction, influence
Jurisprudence
Kids web pages
Legislatures, lobbying
Messaging, marketing
Neighborhoods
Online
Public alerts, policy
Queries
Referenda
Surveys
Transparency
Understanding
Voting, virtual hearings, voice
Web casts, Web portals
X-gen constituents
Youth
Zip code

Conclusion

Over the next decade, e-democracy efforts will start to bear long-awaited fruit. But it won't happen without reasoned and deliberate action. First, leaders need to understand the importance e-democracy in their role as statesmen in a digital world. Secondly, leaders need to understand why their information technology infrastructures are essential to this vision. Government entities invest in information technology infrastructures for a variety of purposes. E-democracy should be one of those driving forces. Most leaders recognize technology infrastructure is the enabling foundation for internal government transformation and a vehicle to provide government services to citizens. The very same technologies can support sweeping changes in e-democracy. It's time to graduate from the now commonplace delivery of information and government services online to a more strategic view that promotes the philosophy and practice of democracy in the free world.