

**E-deliberation and local governance: The role of computer mediated communication in local democratic participation in the United Kingdom****by Joss Hands**

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**Abstract**

This paper focuses on the use of local government Web sites in the United Kingdom to encourage and facilitate democratic deliberation. The question addressed is to what end, and on whose terms, citizens are being encouraged to engage local government via computer-mediated communication. After an initial investigation into the legislative framework of local e-democracy, this paper examines opportunities available for citizens to deliberate by examining 469 local government Web sites. This information is then reviewed in the context of empirical evidence on the practices and attitudes of those responsible for the management and upkeep of the specific sites under question. It appears that while interaction is being encouraged, it is limited and tends towards an individualistic liberal model.

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**Introduction**

The hope that information technology will enrich democracy is one that has been on the public agenda in its present form for at least ten years, certainly since Al Gore's well-known comments about the ideal of an electronic town hall, launched during the 1991–92 U.S. Presidential campaign. Related issues been discussed for more than a hundred years, if we consider the question in broader terms, taking into account the democratising power of notions such as the 'World Brain' (Wells, 1937) or the 'Memex Machine' (Bush, 2001).

However, in our age of distributed computer mediated communication (CMC) this is no longer a theoretical question alone, but an empirical, pragmatic, and normative one: what is technology being used for, what could it be used for and what should it be used for? The question of electronic democracy's development has been widely treated at a theoretical and abstract level (Buchstein, 1997; Poster, 1995; Street, 1997; Dean, 1997; Barney, 2000; Dahlgren, 2001; Dahlberg, 2001a; Downey and Fenton, 2003). Yet there have been few critical studies into local governmental use of e-democracy, particularly in the United Kingdom; the focus having been primarily on the United States (Dahlberg, 2001b; Weare, *et al.*, 1999; Reddick, 2004). In the U.K., there have been concerted attempts by the central government to use the Internet and World Wide Web to open up public services. However, there has been limited, if any, empirical analysis of local government Web sites from the perspective of deliberative democracy. The gap between critical democratic theory and concrete practice is one that this paper addresses.



## Deliberation and democracy

There is a widespread concern regarding the dislocation of citizens from government both in the U.K. and across the Western world. The decreasing voter turnout and increasing alienation of the polity is being widely interpreted as an erosion of citizenship; thus the so-called 'democratic deficit' has been uppermost in the public mind. There are two recent developments that are particularly suggestive of this; firstly the ever declining participation in electoral processes in all Western societies, with a parallel increase in consumption and consumer debt. Secondly the unprecedented engagement of civil society in a wide range of social, political and economic issues outside traditional channels of democratic representation. This can be seen as what Antonio Gramsci (1971) describes as a 'crisis of hegemony,' or what deliberative democrats might prefer to see as a crisis of consensus, an excess of disagreement, or indifference, between the state and its citizens. Whether we detect excesses of disagreement or of indifference there are, nevertheless, real dangers here.

The complexities of this threat to democracy, and what we should do to defend against it, raise the possibility that electronic participation in democratic decision-making may be the way forward. The attempt to ascertain if this is the case is made all the more difficult by the many variations in the understanding of what we actually mean by democracy. For that reason I want to step aside from this first issue and take as my premise the desirability of the deliberative conception of democracy. Thus to find an answer as to whether CMC can enrich democracy means asking if it can help make democracy more deliberative. Of course the nature of deliberative democracy, and what constitutes deliberation itself, is a contested one. However, for the sake of brevity here I will take as my benchmark the possibilities afforded through CMC for the formation of what John Dryzek calls, "reflexive preferences," [1] and that, "deliberative democracy must be critical in its orientation to established power structures." [2] and thus assume a baseline that, "deliberative democracy by definition is open to preference transformation within political interaction." [3]. Therefore the first task is to describe an interpretive framework that can supply evidence of deliberation in democratic practice. While there have been frameworks developed to describe and recognise specific forms of deliberation in CMC (Dahlberg, 2004; Graham and Witschge, 2003) in the context of local government Web

sites, I set the parameters as broadly as possible in order to capture as full a range of activities as is practicable. Thus the elements looked for are defined as: provision of information; opportunities to discuss these matters without coercion with other citizens; opportunities to influence policy makers in formal democratic procedures. To clarify this position I offer this in opposition to a liberal democratic model that focuses on the expression of individual preferences via the election of representatives, and the subsequent expression of preferences to those representatives, and the procedures undertaken therein.

One of the most important procedural requirements for deliberative democracy is open discussion without coercion amongst the citizenry in some form of the public arena. To investigate most specifically what this entails I want to touch on the work of Jürgen Habermas (1984; 1987), specifically some key ideas formulated in his *Theory of Communicative Action* and elaborated and developed in subsequent work. I don't want to revisit the text as a whole but to take as a starting point the notion of the ideal speech situation.

The ideal speech situation posits a space in which uncoerced dialogue can take place free of distortion, in what Habermas refers to as action oriented towards mutual understanding. The central element of deliberation then, in this context is, and must be, communication free from constraint by external or directly involved parties. Thus the basis of decisions and conclusions of discussion should be arrived at through the force of the stronger argument based in the provisions of reasons and evidence, thus free, as much as is possible, from distortion. Clearly the ideal speech situation is by its very nature, ideal, yet the procedural framework is not, and requires that substantive speech acts containing claims to truth or rightness offer conditions suitable for making and responding to redeemable validity claims. Such claims must be equally redeemable by all that could be expected to be affected by them. Thus deliberation, as summarised by Dryzek, is a requirement of legitimate law and policy making.

Some theorists of deliberative democracy have attempted to include other forms of discourse, such as rhetoric and storytelling (Young, 1990), or insist that restrictions in the notion of shared public be replaced with the idea of a set of competing discursive frameworks (Fraser, 1992). While I would wish to defend the principle of rationality broadly, in this case such a defence is not necessary as I am dealing with specific locales. As such the pertinent question is in more simple terms whether the opportunity to meaningfully scrutinise and contribute towards both the formation of specific policies and the running of one's own community is available, which by default requires rational discourse.

It is the provision of meaningful possibilities to influence policy that is significant here. While the role of such spaces as contributing to a more general conception of a 'public sphere' (Habermas, 1989) may be significant in a broader understanding of deliberative democracy, it is in fact a separate question from the one addressed by this paper. Thus one can assess the success of such provision precisely by testing it against the simple question of whether norms in the form of guidelines, practices or policies are really open to deliberative assessment by those that may be affected by them in the virtual spaces provided by local government institutions.

The first place to look in assessing the extent and direction of democratic activity is the policy agenda that steers the practices of local governance, which is set by central government.



## Local e–democracy — The direction of policy

Documentation produced by various governmental and government–linked organisations offers evidence of hope. One policy of the Labour administration in the U.K. has been the fostering of social inclusion by the expansion of access to CMCs. For example the 'UK online' initiative set about the task of getting 100 percent of the population who want it access to the Internet, currently facilitated by a network of some 6,000 UK Online centres (UK Online, 2004). Part of this general move has been the formation of a national strategy for electronic government, including government at the local level. The goal is to get all local services online by the end of 2005. According to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) as of 3 February 2005, "Local authorities in England expect to meet the target to be 100% e–enabled by the end of this year" (ODPM, 2005). One approach to this had been to introduce a single portal, [direct.gov.uk](http://direct.gov.uk), to enable access to various government services and which includes links to all U.K. local authority Web sites. One 'service', which is included in the government's plan, is local e–democracy. Clearly this is a response that takes into consideration, at the very least, dropping voter turnout — but claims to do more. This is, according to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's official strategy document, "a chance to breathe new life into local democracy. Its overall aim to, "enhance the quality of services and the effectiveness of local democracy" [4]. There is, therefore, at least an attempt being made here to provide one of the criteria for deliberative democracy — universal access.

However, such positive pronouncements may not ease the suspicions of deliberative democrats, and there is reason to question the degree of democratization that is actually being sought. Within the strategic document mentioned above, aside from a collection of positive sounding, but substantively limited, comments, the ODPM uses some quite revealing terms. For example it refers to 'customers' rather than residents or citizens in its definition of who will be using local government Web sites: "Councillor, employee or customer" [5]. Yet there is ambiguity, as it does refer to citizens in other places. For example, it sets out some key objectives to, "enhance opportunities for citizens to debate with each other, to engage with their local services and councils, to access their political representatives and hold them to account" [6]. Though what is noticeable is the interpretation of citizenship, which is here restricted to debating with "each other" and holding representatives "to account," a focus distinct from the deliberative requirement of "influencing collective outcomes" [7].

This ODPM document also identifies a set of case studies of good practice, all of which refer to instrumental processes related to particular 'customer' related outcomes. Again the ambiguity surfaces in the extensive use of the term, e–democracy, where it is confusingly associated with a group of "key services" which also includes "Education, Health, Transport" [8]. While the foregrounding of e–democracy is clearly significant its grouping with other such 'services' is curious. The issue is more closely focussed in the sub–section "Renewing Local Democracy" where there is a stated aim to "help citizens participate in local debates ... consultation forums and citizen panels" [9].

While this sounds like a progressive idea there is no indication of how any of these things might actually contribute to policy making other than as an afterthought of policy makers. There is,

however, reference to e–democracy as playing a role in support for councillors in which, "e–mail and online discussions can also help to make councillors more accessible to — and better informed about — a broad spectrum of their citizens and electors" [10]. This suggests less deliberative engagement than it does an awareness of opinion. Therefore the role of the citizen here is limited to the expression of individual preferences to elected representatives. This kind of approach seems to be reflected in the attitude towards e–democracy in central government. In another exploratory government document in this area, *In the service of democracy*, the point is made that:

"The success of interactive TV shows such as Big Brother or Pop Idol is largely due to the technology in allowing a greater number of people to be directly involved. The technology provides a means for mass participation. This is the same principle that lies behind the Government's strategy for e–democracy." [11]

Later in the same document there are less alarming ideas, such as the notion of a "citizen space" where all public consultation exercises would be available [12]. Indeed the citizen space Web site, now up and running, participated in a recent widespread consultation exercise on GM foods (see <http://www.gmnation.org.uk/>) that produced a conclusive rejection of the technology. However, there is no mechanism for translating this into policy; the findings were ignored by the Labour government. However, where it offers a more promising conception than the Big Brother scenario, the document does not engage with the potential for technology to deepen and widen governance, but limits it to making existing consultation processes available electronically.

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The kinds of ambiguities within the language used, the vagueness of the proposals and the lack of interrogation of exactly what e–democracy is, leading to a somewhat confusing array of normative claims, is also reflected in some of the documents presented by various think tanks and consultants. In the document [Bowling together: Online public engagement in policy deliberation](#), produced by Stephen Coleman and John Gøtze for the [Hansard Society](#), there is a broad outline of what they consider to be the desirable characteristics of online deliberation, including such reasonable ideals as "freedom from manipulation or coercion" and "accesses to balanced information," as well as, "a rule based framework for discussion" [13]. These criteria are certainly in keeping with the pragmatics of online deliberation. And there is clearly a gesture towards the possibilities of developing online deliberation, as well as the significant impact this may have on democracy more broadly in which a "civic commons in Cyberspace" might, "become part of the democratic furniture" [14].

However there is again a limitation here to conceiving electronic democracy as merely an extension of existing structures. This manifests itself through the process of finding a political or democratic role for a technology rather than letting the normative moral, ethical and political arguments inform the use and development of that technology; a kind of reverse technological

determinism which Raymond Williams (1974) has described as "symptomatic technology" and Andrew Feenberg as "instrumentalism" [15].

Regardless of how firm the commitment to existing democracy, what follows from Coleman and Gøtze's position is that the actual nature of engagement is not offered up for deliberation itself. It is taken as "Engaging the public in policy making is not a means of diminishing the representative relationship, but of strengthening it." What this means in practice, "representatives can tap into the experiences and expertise of the public and citizens can come to understand the complexities and dilemmas of policy making" [16]. Such an idea seems to exclude the possibility that technology may enter into the nature of communicative relationships, offering either new formations, or restricting old ones, and following from this it is difficult to see how this understanding of deliberation is that far removed from a description of existing representative democracy. Again the object of democracy is conceived as the registering of individual preferences and the technology a way of making this more efficient. Therefore at best it is an understanding of deliberation in the liberal constitutionalist sense: discussion as preferable, though not necessary, and the passing of views on to a representative, who ultimately makes his or her own decision, at worst this becomes a spectacle of participation.

In the specific context of local electronic government the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), in its document "E-participation in local government," makes a similar set of observations remarking that, "The development of e-democracy is an important aspect of democratic renewal" and that "best practice" should include such headline measures as, "Responsiveness ... Inclusiveness ... Published rules and guidelines [and] ... use of moderators" [17]. However, the term participation is used in a fairly limited sense. While they advocate, "Well informed deliberation and debate" [18], the term deliberation is rather offered as a synonym for discussion alone [19]. There is no sense of how various digital processes would actually be linked to policy formation beyond the kind of exercises which already exist, such as polling or focus group activities. Indeed the comment regarding the model of 'Big Brother' mentioned earlier would seem to be applicable here. The only point at which there is a further step is in the suggestion of very local, "Neighbourhood democracy experiments ... [that could] devolve a small amount of resource to a local area and involve online citizen discussion" [20]. The wording is significant here as the positive outcome of this would be to address, "the perception that participation is irrelevant to outcomes" [21]. So more clearly deliberative exercises are here advocated, so long as the scale and stake is extremely limited.

IPPR's report is critical of some existing practices by both local authorities and the central government which fail to meet best practice standards. This critique relates to pre-defined best practice criteria, reliant on a rather limited sense of deliberation. There are no substantive questions relating to underlying structures or practices of local democracy.

It is probable that the models of democracy already in place, and subject to a variety of problems related to colonisation and stagnation, will simply be transferred to the electronic domain; a danger of e-democracy more generally, as identified by John Street (1997). Therefore, it is worth asking whether local authorities are tending to follow these kinds of pathways, or developing more expansive and innovative approaches that might challenge and develop models of democratic inclusion and deliberative engagement.



## Local e–democracy — In practice

For an initial snapshot I contacted the majority of U.K. local authorities [22], 469 in total, with a questionnaire, at the same time I investigated what was available on their Web sites for users wanting to participate in local democratic decision making, participation and policy formation. The intention of the Web site analysis was to, in the first instance, have an oversight of the kinds of democratic activities taking place, and in the second to examine more closely those that offer deliberative possibilities. I will first discuss the Web site analysis and subsequently look at the responses to the questionnaire.

I looked for a variety of elements that would indicate opportunities for participation of all kinds. The options currently existing can be split into provision of information and opportunities for interaction, though this does not necessarily, but can, entail deliberation. The prior includes elements such as consultation documents, information on consultation procedures and information on elected representatives, the latter communicative opportunities such as e–mail addresses, discussion forums and provision of other contact details. In terms of basic information — such as names of councillors, wards represented and basic contact details such as e–mail addresses and telephone numbers — the vast majority of Web sites provided at least a minimum of information, most in the form of helpdesk addresses, Web enquiry forms or direct contact details. I found only one local authority which had no e–mail addresses and was limited to a single telephone number. This suggests that at the very least the Web is a source of contact and information, and can be seen to be an entry point for basic democratic activities, which for many would have been unavailable prior to the Web [23].

An existing process that has the clearest potential for deliberative democracy is that of the consultation exercise. These take place fairly regularly across central and local government in relation to a range of issues, and are meant to engage citizens in the process of policy formation, often involving citizens in discussion, analysis and moulding of policy. While not always defined as such they do offer a useful template to examine exiting deliberative activity. One of these initiatives of local e–government has been to make consultation exercises available online. For the purposes of this study, for consultation to count as evidence of online deliberation it needs at least a minimum of public debate within an electronic forum or fora over substantive policy issues, usually with regard to specific issues or projects; be that on building, budgetary or other activities, alongside formal routes of implementation. Thus if e–deliberation is to be a reality then consultation activity of such a kind needs to be functioning, or have potential to function, online.

In terms of the initial snapshot of the 469 U.K. local authorities with Web sites available, 19 percent had direct links from their home pages to some form of consultation information, either about the procedure or links to ongoing consultation documents. Most of these included some form of response mechanism such as e–mail addresses, Web forms or online polls, and other contact details, which asked for responses to the documents provided. A further 9 percent of Web sites included this type of information in a more buried form, either more than one link

away from the homepage or found via search engines. Of course there may be more such documents available, but specific addresses would be needed — which seems to defeat the point.

This suggests two initial responses, firstly that when authorities have taken the trouble to place documents online they tend to consider them significant enough to be foregrounded, secondly that this type of consultation process is by far the most prevalent single one on such sites. Clearly this does represent a form of democratic interactivity, though the degree to which it can be considered deliberative remains open. Most of these consultation pages had some form of feedback provision, in the form of the e-mail addresses, postal addresses or telephone numbers of specific persons responsible for them, which clearly offers some potential for deliberative exchanges. However, if we were expecting the Web to enrich and generate new modes of deliberation then the discussion forum or bulletin board, as technology unique to the Web, is the format that would most immediately suggest itself as way of enriching the consultation process in a truly deliberative fashion.

In fact only 4.3 percent of authorities had some version, representing 20 out of 469 authorities. Of these 20 authorities 10 also had some kind of consultation information or documents. The combination of consultation documents alongside discussion forums would certainly be a useful tool for deliberation, combining the key elements of relevant knowledge provision running alongside the opportunity to debate these at length in an open forum. I looked at these 10 sites to get a sense of the kind of relationship between consultation exercises, online discussion and the authorities in question. There were no Web sites with explicit links between online consultation exercises and discussion fora, bulletin boards or any other such arenas. Most of the discussions taking place were in the forms of strings of messages grouped under various particular headings, mostly related to civic matters and issues directly related to individual's interests or their particular neighbourhoods.

Alongside these were some general issues boards ranging from the irritations of living under neighbours with laminate flooring, the effects of television on anti-social behaviour such as spitting and behaving loudly outside pubs, and how to get rid of lousy councillors; the thoughtful first answer to which was, 'judge them on their achievements, and vote for or against them at the next election'.

All of these sites were moderated, from a minimum of removing offensive language to more draconian exclusion of party political comment, though moderation does not imply monitoring for content. For example Milton Keynes, from which the above comments taken, make it explicit that the forum is not monitored by the council and is purely for the use of citizens. However this is not the case throughout, at least two councils (West Dumbartonshire, Sandwell) do have active monitoring, and moderators who on occasion intervene with information, advice or offers to pass on comments, which in some cases are responded to by the individuals responsible for the area of policy or execution.

Although there were no direct connections to consultation activity there were some active attempts by moderators to engage citizens in discussion about ongoing policy orientation. For example there were two topics set up by the moderator of Gloucester city council's forum, who called for discussion on the council's budget proposals and its best value performance plan. The latter had no responses and the former was not actually a response to the budget proposals but

a list of complaints revolving around personal grievances and general observations, for example, "Is it not time to impose a charge upon the various fast food take away and drive through outlets to cover the cost of clearing up the litter that their customers leave scattered to the four winds to pollute and deface the environment of our city." And "Why should council taxes fund the Christmas lights?" Similar topic strings had in fact already been set up by the same person with the same general points. Another such question is raised by the moderator of Mid-Suffolk district council, asking for comments on the Mid-Suffolk local plan, with no responses. While most of the forums had the chance for citizens to begin discussions there were none which had been set up in response to ongoing consultations.

The most fully developed site, singularly so in fact, was that of Wolverhampton City Council. Its 'Wolforum' integrates discussion forums, articles on local issues from various sources, help groups and external links of interest such as NGOs and other relevant sites. This is certainly attributable to the council being involved in an EU funded 'webocracy' trial, part of its 'Information Technology Programme'. The rationale of the project, for example, includes the aims to,

"facilitate communication between citizens and public administration; to enable a user friendly access to information; to support public discussion on important issues of public interest; to provide citizens with opportunity to express their opinion, formulate alternative solutions and to vote on them." (Webocracy Consortium, 2003)

This is not very dissimilar to the kind of discourse contained within the U.K. government documents. However in this case the link between the project, the funding and the Web site is much closer. The Wolverhampton site mirrors the aims in its provision; it has a more joined up structure and a broader remit. However, it does not actually connect with any consultation, and in fact the actual forum topics are not much different from those at other sites. Indeed when asked what the council's priorities were in delivery of e-government the Wolverhampton policy officer, in charge of e-government, chose the improvement of existing activities above the development of e-democracy, though did aspire to "a fully deliberative process" at some point in the future, but did not have any concrete plans for doing so. The 'E-Champion' at Wokingham, another authority with both consultation and mediated forums, when asked about how he views the government's "aim to enhance the quality of local services and the effectiveness of local democracy" [24] saw effectiveness here as being far more than simply delivery of services or voting. He claimed that "Effective democracy is far more than increasing voter turnout or attendance at public meetings." However he did not mention online discussions as being a route for this process, instead focusing on citizen panels, the Web site being used for, "ad-hoc consultations including budget consultation."

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There is a similar relationship between consultation exercises and online polls. Clearly, while such limited polling does not reveal much, should there be such a connection its use may at least indicate the council's attitude towards engaging publics in consultation, by raising

awareness. There were 10 local authorities with both online polls and some form of online consultation exercise, of these 10 none had any connection to the consultation exercises running. While six were basic polls on the Web site the others ranged from the question of whether David Blaine was a fraud, or if smoking should be banned in public places.

The mode of online consultation via publishing of documents, along side provision of e-mail addresses or Web forms, is the most widely used mechanism for interaction. It is also the case that the vast majority of consultation exercises available online refer to existing documents and processes. As such this case supports the notion of the Web being used as an extension of existing practices rather than as a technology that facilitates new and enriched forms of deliberation. These practices cannot be said to contribute towards the development of 'reflexive preferences' as a function of the Web sites themselves. While it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from this evidence, there is an indication that in its current form, local government Web sites are oriented towards increasing efficiency of information delivery, and to a lesser extent encouraging communication in the form of direct points of access to elected representatives and officials. The fostering of strong democratic fora engaged or contributing towards policy formation is extremely limited. The implementation of e-government by local authorities, as far as judgement is possible, does therefore reflect the more limited parameters of the government policy documents discussed earlier.



## Local e-democracy — Attitudes and implementation

In order to gain some insight into the actual processes of interpretation of government policy that are contributing to the development of these Web sites, specifically of how democratic imperatives are being engaged, interpreted and implemented, I circulated a questionnaire with a mixture of closed and open questions to all those responsible for the running, upkeep and management of all the Web sites analysed. Of the 469 councils contacted I received 59 responses. While this does not offer a sample that could be considered scientifically representative, it does present some useful insights into some current attitudes and practices. A comparable study undertaken by IPPR received 40 responses. (Kearns, *et al.*, 2002) To enquire as to whether the limited availability of deliberative activity is due to a focus on other areas of electronic provision such as the telephone, I asked whether those responsible thought their organisation was prioritising the Web as the primary means of delivering e-government. By far the greatest proportion, 50 percent, said that they agreed, while 26 percent said they disagreed, 4 percent both agreed or disagreed strongly, while 16 percent had no view.

When asked about the priority of e-democracy as against the other stipulated aims of e-government, such as service delivery, the picture suggests that — despite the ODPM placing e-democracy as a key aim — the Web is seen primarily as a mechanism for delivering services. Democracy, which would even include voting, is a secondary consideration. When given a choice between priorities, without being restricted to one priority, only 5 percent choose 'the development of e-democracy' as opposed to 53 percent choosing 'improving efficiency of existing activities' and 53 percent 'new channels of public service provision.'

To further understand the place of deliberation, in relation to consultation, within local government Web sites I asked the persons responsible for implementation what they thought the term 'consultation' entailed as far as e-government is concerned, 36 percent considered this to include availability of documents alongside appropriate means of response. Only 12 percent indicated just the availability of e-mail addresses and information about areas of responsibility, with 15 percent choosing mediated discussion groups and 17 percent online polls. There was no cross indication of consultation plus mediated discussion groups. This does seem to indicate a sense of consultation involving a more engaged and substantive process than a simple system of contacts, however only 7 percent, which represents just four authorities, considered that consultation included a 'fully deliberative process using all electronic means available.'

If consultation is not viewed by respondents as entailing the kinds of procedures we would expect to find in online deliberation, then as the only existing process of governance that approaches a deliberative framework, this does not provide much encouragement. If one would consider the combination of consultation documents and mediated discussion as approximating electronic deliberation then the absence of such reflects this view. Particularly when we consider the limited extent of consultation exercises more generally. The restricted practice in place is unlikely to be much developed if the attitudes of the respondents are reflective of the wider constituency.

**While there is consensus on the central aim of opening up access to the Internet, of using it effectively for democratic purposes, there is ambiguity in precisely what e-democracy, and particularly deliberation, does, could and should, entail.**

However, attitudes towards democracy in principle are much broader. An open question requested respondents to define what they imagine the term effective to mean in the statement 'enhancing effectiveness of local democracy,' a quote from the ODPM's aims for e-government. There are distinct 'effectiveness' of democracy is seen to be reliant on ongoing participation and engagement. This is manifest in use of words such as: 'inclusive; responsive; accessible and engagement,' which come up repeatedly. And there are phrases used which echo these, for example the Exeter city council looks for, "provision of as many access points to the democratic process as possible." Rhonnda wants: "whole public knowing and contributing," while Three Rivers district council suggests that, "meaningful and productive citizen participation" is how they conceive effective democracy.

While these kinds of attitudes are encouraging there is certainly an absence of procedural definition. There is a general sense of wanting openness and participation, and that the Web offers this opportunity, but not what this would entail in practice.

Alternatively, the second distinct theme is one that sees the idea of effectiveness translate into a notion of instrumental efficiency. We see words used such as: "cost effective; customer; efficient; results; voter turn out." For example, the Arun district council describes effective as "making services accessible at a time and place in a manner which meets the customer's requirements." The Sheffield city council, while looking for, "a level of engagement with its customers," limits the definition of success for this to increased voter turn out, and Haringey says it is focused on an "improved customer experience."

Thus e–democracy is viewed as either somewhat aspirational, as an undefined ideal type, or in terms of a consumer model where the meaning of democracy is translated into wide access and delivery of specific services to individuals. While there is consensus on the central aim of opening up access to the Internet, of using it effectively for democratic purposes, there is ambiguity in precisely what e–democracy, and particularly deliberation, does, could and should, entail.



## Conclusion: Individuals, civil society and government

I have, up to this point, articulated two possible paths for e–democracy. Firstly there is the deliberative path in which local government uses CMCs to foster strong democracy between citizens and between citizens and representatives. Secondly there is the liberal model that uses CMCs to improve efficiency of communication and enhance the registration of individual preferences, what might be called an individuated, as opposed to deliberative, approach. The common ground which emerges when we consider the previously mentioned policy documents, and the indications of this research, is that ‘e–democracy,’ in whatever form, is conceived by central and local government as counting as such primarily when it connects individuals to the state, thus following the individuated or liberal model. For deliberative democrats this is clearly disappointing.

This approach suggests that deliberation can, and should, take place within the institutional framework of government. However, this is to exclude the role of civil society and the public sphere from this process. There is an alternative model, which conceives that the rightful place for deliberation to take place is in the public sphere. Thus a more clearly defined two–track model, where the process of deliberation and government are clearly delineated, may in fact be more appropriate to deliberative democracy. Such a model involves government handing over information to civil society, where policy can be debated within some form of public sphere, or array of counter publics. Its requirement is then to develop a mechanism for engaging its citizens not directly as individuals, but rather to interact and take opinion from the various elements of civil society and the public sphere that have already undergone a deliberative process.

This would be a model in which “Deliberative democracy sees the free public sphere of civil society as the principle arena for the articulation, contestation, and resolution of normative discourses” [25]. Indeed some theorists in this domain actively want to restrict public deliberation as part of state institutions precisely because it may devalue or thin out the processes of civil society [26]. Indeed we can see this as opposed to other liberal versions of ‘deliberation’ such as John Rawls’ notion of public reason, a concept that restricts deliberation to the institutions of government (Benhabib, 2002; Fraser, 1996; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). Indeed in Rawls’ case the restriction is extended to matters of ‘basic justice’ and constitutional change (Rawls, 1999).

In order to address the danger of underestimating the role of the public sphere in contributing to actually existing e–democracy, and missing a hidden deliberative element, one further question I looked at was whether we can see any evidence of this kind of model playing a role in the implementation of local e–democracy and e–deliberation.

I therefore asked whether the contacts via CMC were mainly individuals or representatives of groups or organisations: 51 percent of participating authorities said individuals, 8 percent said from groups or organisations and 41 percent could not say.


Next, when asked if they have links with, or monitor, for example NGO or community Web sites 32 percent of respondents said they did this in some form. Many consisted only of links from the Web site rather than regular monitoring, or more formal connections, such as service delivery needs. For example, Cambridgeshire says, "We include details of many community organisations and sites in our community a–z ... Where there are major service delivery 'overlaps' *e.g.* social care, the linkages can be strong and active." The city of Lincoln Council says, "We only establish links where we can see an obvious relationship between the activities of the City Council and the organisation in question and where we perceive the public will receive added value by having the link." And the Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council reports that, "We will link to any appropriate local community group, the purpose is simply to signpost their information." None made any mention of monitoring civil society on a wider basis, or following the developments of social movements or other "weak publics" (Fraser, 1992).

Among those respondents who commented there seems little awareness, or willingness, to engage with the discourses of civil society. Such processes seem excluded from what would be considered democratic practice. Thus the kind of deliberation which is counted as such is fairly limited, and contained within a narrow range of parameters — those being the relationship of individuals to the state. This is closer to a Rawlsian vision of democracy, based on the notion of public reason, than a deliberative one. His view of the public sphere, as Seyla Benhabib has observed, "is not located in civil society but in the state and its organisations" [27]. Indeed the confusion of the two spheres has been argued to be dangerous. Norberto Bobbio suggests that there is a serious mistake in, "The confusion between civil society and political society," because it makes for "idolatry of the state" [28]. It can therefore be argued that the focus on individual connections between citizens and state representatives as being the horizon of deliberation, as limited as it is, which has been detected in this research, risks just this kind of mistake.

Ironically this may give cause to be less gloomy about the situation described above than may at first seem the case. One could argue that should the current e–democracy mechanism actually become more effective it might well end up colonising any deliberative activity that would otherwise take place in civil society. In that scenario rather than democratise, such a situation would only ever tend to produce a diminution of civil society by the state, and thus have the opposite effect by limiting democratic rigour. Thus the limited and piecemeal occurrence of e–democracy — as it is currently conceived by policy makers and practitioners — may not be considered to be such a bad thing. At least the dialogical mechanisms that do exist, and which are clearly oriented towards a more Rawlsian conception, are limited enough not to colonise civil society. While this may be to paint the situation with an overly rosy perspective we should not discount the responsibility of the state and the government to support the growth and vibrancy of the public sphere.

If the focus were to be on encouraging the involvement and development of civil society, to be connected with, but not part of, government, the possibilities of a truly deliberative process could be developed. By encouraging a more associational model of civil society that was nourished by governmental support — but at arms length from it — the balance of state and civil society would be protected. Thus a situation would develop in which they become mutually enriching and re-enforcing (Baynes, 2002). Hence the aspect of my original question, of what form local e-democracy should take, can be opened up for future discussion on this basis.

The potential here is strong. There is already an almost universal provision of standard information regarding council proceedings and contacts. While the current focus and use of this information is the connection of the individual to the state, the step towards its use by the existing structures and fora of civil society is in many ways more likely, less daunting and potentially more productive in its capacity to exert pressure and build deliberative momentum than many of the initiatives being officially tested or implemented. A grass roots approach has the advantage of building strong local links and marshalling the resources of civil society in a way that is steered from the start by citizens themselves, without the need to await democracy to be formulated in a top down approach.

In the final analysis the prioritising of public service provision may not be seen in an oppositional relationship to deliberation. Rather we need to make sure this takes place in tandem with deliberative activities located in the most appropriate social and political spheres. The main aim then would be to develop structures and mechanisms designed to connect authority with the public sphere and civil society, both digitally and actually. Thought of in this way, the potential afforded by Web is to interlace with, and even to strengthen and expand, deliberation via civil society. It is to this process we need to turn our attention in the future. By doing so we may help to forge reciprocal links with the state that renew our conception of democracy. Hence we should simply not move into a new medium limited and traditional views of communication but develop and mobilise the full dialogical potential of Web. 

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Joss Hands teaches communication and media studies at Anglia Polytechnic University, Cambridge, U.K. He is co-editor, with Eugenia Siapera, and contributor to the book, *At the interface: Continuity and transformation in culture and politics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004). His recent work has also appeared in the journals *Philosophy and Social Criticism* and *Cultural Politics*.

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# Notes

1. Dryzek, 2000, p. 2.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Dryzek, 2000, p. 9.

4. ODPM, 2002, pp. 3–5.

5. ODPM, 2002, p. 5.

6. ODPM, 2002, p. 6.

7. Dryzek, 2000, p. 2.

8. ODPM, 2002, p. 10.

9. ODPM, 2002, p. 13.

10. *Ibid.*

11. H.M. Government, 2002, p. 24.

12. H.M. Government, 2002, p. 29.

13. Coleman and Gøtze, 2001, p. 6.

14. Coleman and Gøtze, 2001, p. 11.

15. Feenberg, 1999, p. 8.

16. Coleman and Gøtze, 2001, p. 12.

17. Kearns, *et al.*, 2002, p. 9.

18. Kearns, *et al.*, 2002, p. 16.

19. Kearns, *et al.*, 2002, p. 33.

20. Kearns, *et al.*, 2002, p. 34.

21. *Ibid.*

22. The majority of the research undertaken for this paper was carried out in the latter half of 2003 and reflects an accurate analysis the Internet at that time. The initial findings were presented at the annual AoIR (Association of Internet Researchers) conference in Toronto, Canada 2003.

23. Central government required all English local authorities to provide a document addressing their plans for provision of e-government called "Implementing electronic government," those authorities being deemed to have effective plans being eligible for a £200,000 grant to assist the development, then a follow up document addressing progress which was due in October 2002 with a further 200,000 available. All English local authorities have had to produce submit such a document and are meant to place them on their Web sites. Interestingly out of just under 400 authorities, while the majority do have their IEG somewhere on their Web site, most are buried only to be found via search engines or persistence, only 15 percent (59 out of 388) have direct links from their home pages. The most recent round of IEG reports were completed in 2004.

24. ODPM, 2002, pp. 3–5.

25. Benhabib, 2002, p. 115.

26. According to John Dryzek (2000, p. 4), deliberation, "must re-emphasise oppositional civil society and public spheres as sources of democratic critique and renewal."

27. Benhabib, 2002, p. 143.

28. Bobbio, 1987, p. 156.

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