Bringing E-Democracy Back In

Why It Matters for Future Research on E-Governance

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The author argues that contemporary digital information communication technologies (ICTs) facilitate new forms of e-government–enabled public sector policy making that enshrine some of the important norms and practices of e-democracy. The potential for linking e-democracy in civil society with e-government at the level of the local and national state is far from straightforward but nevertheless achievable. Following a consideration of the democratization effects of e-democracy and e-government, the author outlines how their norms and practices are converging in four principal areas: online consultations integrating civil societal groups with bureaucracies and legislatures, the internal democratization of the public sector itself, the involvement of users in the design and delivery of public services, and the diffusion of open-source collaboration in public organizations. These now feature as some of the core areas for research in this field and our broader understanding of how ICTs are reshaping governance, the state, and democracy.

Jane Fountain's (2001) *Building the Virtual State* is one of the first book-length analyses of e-government by a political scientist. Although the focus is almost exclusively on the United States, its conclusions have a broader significance. It serves as a theoretically informed, empirically rich account of e-government change in the federal administration. At its core is the technology enactment framework, which attempts to avoid technological determinism and to extend the classic social-shaping approach to the role of information communication technologies (ICTs) in organizational life (Fountain, 2001). This is perhaps not as new as it is made to appear; similar claims have been made in the past by many writers, including for example, Kling and Iacono (1989) and Danziger, Dutton, Kling, and Kraemer (1982). But by assuming that technologies may be "enacted" in radically different ways across different public organizations, Fountain's framework provides a subtle and nuanced appreciation of the interplay of preexisting norms, procedures, and rules within bureaucracies and how these affect the introduction of new technological forms. Moreover, it is not elaborated in the text, but there is scope within the framework to map how organizational change occurs over time without resorting to many of the linear progression myths that have bedeviled some of the overhyped accounts of e-government to date (e.g., Holmes, 2001).

Building the Virtual State (Fountain, 2001) is therefore a significant book. Yet it is also curiously narrow. It contains virtually no discussion of the effect of the Internet and related ICTs on democratic politics more broadly conceived, by which I mean state-civil society relations as played out in ICT-mediated modes by politicians and citizens in political parties,

interest groups, social movements, legislatures, and federal-local relations. Nevertheless, I do not intend to make predictable and unfair points about sins of omission the basis of this article. All research inevitably involves specialization, and Fountain's (2001) book, as a pioneer academic publication in the field, is an excellent contribution to an increasingly important area of political science and public administration. Instead, building in part on some of the themes and issues in her book, some of which are only latent, I want to map out some future lines of inquiry that I believe are important for both analytical and normative reasons for future research on the use of ICTs in governance. As governments throughout the developed world continue with the next phase of administrative reforms, broadly organized under the umbrella of e-government, a distinct but nevertheless related set of developments is occurring in the sphere of what is now commonly termed *e-democracy.* Yet, however such terms may be defined and understood, the claims made about these two innovations are steadily diverging, and I believe the relatively narrow focus of Fountain's book is symptomatic of this process. Public administration scholars, public policy analysts, and public management specialists focus on e-government, whereas political communication specialists, social movement scholars, and democratic theorists sharpen their analytical tools on e-democracy. But are e-government and e-democracy really so incompatible? By extending some of the ideas in Fountain's work while necessarily adding insights from outside of her immediate concerns, I want to sketch out the broad and, it needs to be said, tentative argument that contemporary digital ICTs facilitate new forms of e-government-enabled public sector policy making that enshrine some of the important norms and practices of e-democracy. The potential for linking e-democracy in civil society with e-government at the level of the local and national state is far from straightforward but nevertheless achievable. Future research in this area should seek to explore a fruitful convergence of these two dynamics.

For the ultraskeptical, "politics as usual" approach, both e-government and e-democracy can be dismissed on two identical bases: First, both will not achieve what their advocates claim, and second, even if surface changes occur, the exigencies of liberal democracy in the early 21st century will scupper fundamental change (Margolis & Resnick, 2000). E-government, with its dominant managerial discourse of cost cutting and efficiency—facets that Christopher May and I identified elsewhere as being at the center of reform programs in Europe and the United States (Chadwick & May, 2003)—provides on the face of it excellent evidence of the failure of digital ICTs to make a lasting difference to citizenship and democratic politics. But things have moved on since the 1990s. Is an all-or-nothing approach helpful in describing and explaining changes that are occurring under the weight of new uses of Internet technology, or does it risk becoming blind to a number of recent developments, many of which point to an inevitably more complicated, messy, and contingent future in which the practices and norms of e-government and those of e-democracy become intertwined?

DEMOCRATIZATION: THE FORGOTTEN PROMISE OF E-GOVERNMENT?

The use of digital ICTs to transform the public sector rests on a number of key claims. "E-gov" visionaries differ in their emphases, but it is possible to discern a set of reform goals that are shared across the board, and democratization is one of them. This is not to say that we should take it for granted that all such reforms are intrinsically democratic or that they share common roots with e-democracy (Grönlund, 2003). For instance, cost reduction, which has steadily moved to the center of the Bush administration's e-government drive at the expense

of some of the slightly more socially conscious themes in the Clinton-Gore National Performance Review, has, taken alone, relatively little to offer as a mode of ICT-enabled democratization. But cost savings aside, there are some important claims being made about the democratizing effects of e-government, some that are perhaps less obvious than others.

The hope is that public services exposed to the same kinds of stringent tests as private sector firms operating within the realm of e-commerce will in the long term become more responsive to the demands of their users or customers, more able to quickly adapt to changes in operational policy, rapidly process individual requests, clamp down on fraud, and play leading roles in the provision of credible, high-quality information to citizens suffering from information overload. Fountain's (2001) book contains some useful analysis of these developments. In this comparatively narrow but still important sense, e-government brings government "closer to the people" by meeting the expectations of service users regarding convenience, accessibility, and timeliness.

Yet, many commentators go further than this managerial approach, arguing for a radical extension of e-government to incorporate citizens more fully into regular policy-making processes. Such perspectives go beyond simple electronic service delivery, integration, and information provision and seek to use ICTs to incorporate citizens' deliberation into the initial stages of policy development or the very process of "reengineering" public services (Lenihan, 2002; Lenihan & Alcock, 2000). In its most radical guise, this form of e-government would entail a radical overhaul of the modern administrative state as regular electronic consultations involving elected politicians, civil servants, pressure groups, and other affected interests become standard practice in all stages of the policy process. It is this aspect of e-government, almost wholly absent from Fountain's (2001) treatment, that provides one of the bases for some convergence with the aspirations and emergent practices of e-democracy, to which I return in the following.

The democratization claims made for e-government are impossible to conceive without the changes in ICTs that have occurred since the early 1990s. If we take a brief backward glance at the uses of public sector computing during the postwar period, we can see that with the popularization of the desktop machine and the Internet, a new generation of organizational use of computers has emerged that "leverages the power of each of these powerful desktop computers . . . through . . . networking " (Landsbergen & Wolken, 2001, p. 207; see also Anderson & Dawes, 1991). With an eye to the future, we might add to this the convergence of computer-based technologies with entertainment technologies and the emergence of fully mobile communications devices with Internet access. This model has been a crucial foundation of e-government initiatives to date, with their multipurpose portals designed to integrate departments and services and present unified, user-friendly "front-ends" accessible by various means, including in the British case, interactive digital television (implemented in April 2002), high-bandwidth mobile devices, and public electronic kiosks in various locations such as libraries, supermarkets, and railway stations (Central Information Technology Unit, Cabinet Office [UK], 1999, 2000a, 2000b). This strategy has been made more achievable through the new "interoperability" brought about by the use of eXtensible Markup Language (XML)—a means of handling data that enables cross-platform integration within government and less troublesome integration with the wider Internet (Central Information Technology Unit, Cabinet Office [UK], 2000b; McGill, 2000). The adoption of XML, though not without its problems, is a firm indication of the paradigm shift in the use of ICTs by governments. It acknowledges that the web browser and the Internet, with their associated standards, protocols, and file formats brought together under the umbrella of bodies such as the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), should form the foundation of the public sector's approach to ICTs for the foreseeable future. The UK Office of the E-Envoy's doc-

umentation on interoperability makes it explicit for the first time in British government that the most popular ways of transferring data across the Internet—from graphics to video and sound—should be used by government from now on. The days of inward-facing, Byzantine, tailor-made systems that rapidly outdate are perhaps coming to an end. This recognition of seamless integration between internal and external networks also provides a basis for the convergence of e-government and e-democracy.

Such transformations in the technologies themselves have not, of course, always been mirrored by changes in governments' and citizens' attitudes to how they might be used. The use of database applications for information retrieval and electronic filing coupled with an emphasis (even an obsession) with automating routine tasks has been at the center of public sector use of computers since the late 1960s (Bellamy & Taylor, 1998; Margetts, 1998). The demands generated by the creation and expansion of welfare states in Western liberal democracies found a "natural" response in ICT solutions; they held out the promise of speeding up information processing and response times, especially in information-intensive agencies such as those dealing with benefit payments, criminal justice, and health care. But even under retrenchment and the "rolled back" welfare states of the 1980s and 1990s under the influence of neo-liberal and neo-conservative regimes, most notably in the United Kingdom and the United States, the demand for new ways of implementing public sector use of ICTs carried on at an incredible pace. The mass-provision, Fordist model of welfarism, enacted by "silo-based" public bureaucracies staffed by unambiguously "public" civil servants necessitated large-scale, often departmentally tailor-made data processing solutions. In contrast, the post-Fordist emphasis on "knowledge workers," cost reduction, efficiency, disaggregation, decentralization, and "flat" hierarchies (Smith, 2001), increasingly in devolved administrative agencies run on "business-like" lines, requires new types of systems—ones that can be organized flexibly and seamlessly around interoperable standards and protocols that interface with the outside world; in short: ubiquitous networked computing.

It would, of course, be simplistic to explain the experience of e-government to date as an undiluted creation of a post-Fordist administrative paradigm. Indeed, what is evident, especially in Fountain's (2001) account of "Weber Redux" (pp. 60-63), is a rather uneasy blend of the old and the new; a "dual system . . . that combines pockets of networked creativity and openness with large areas of traditional command and control" (p. 164). Governments' information-processing requirements have far from disappeared. In fact, they may well have increased under the influence of the decentralizing tendencies of the new public management. Health, welfare, and criminal justice agencies continue to play pivotal roles in the vast majority of Western states and crucially, involve administrative coordination at and between both national and local levels. At the same time, even if the technological barriers to joined up government are being overcome by the implementation of new, more interoperable networks where information sharing around government is supposedly made easier, as David Landsbergen and George Wolken (2001) argued in their study of federal and state officials and information technology (IT) managers in the United States, this is by itself no guarantee that information sharing will actually occur. Thus, the fact remains that much of what governments do with computers will continue to be based in silos and will involve automation, information retrieval, and management: the domain of data entry, electronic archives, databases, and one-dimensional (therefore relatively "dumb"), often inflexible (because purpose-made) applications and ways of working.

Yet, it needs to be emphasized that these Weberian exigencies will increasingly come under pressure from the new impetus behind e-government, which in the hands of its most vociferous proponents promises a complete and radical overhaul of public sector institutions—a move away from the simple addition of technology to existing ways of working and

the transformation of public bureaucracies to reflect the advances in networking achieved since the rise of the Internet. The ubiquity of network technologies offers the potential to increase political participation and reshape the state into an open, interactive, network form as an alternative to both traditional, hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations and more recent, market-like forms of service delivery based on the "contracting out" (Domberger, 1998) of public sector activities. Proponents of this perspective argue that widespread use of the Internet means that the traditional application of ICTs in public bureaucracies, originally based around inward-facing mainframe computer systems originating in the 1960s, should now be superseded by outward-facing networks in which the division between an organization's internal information processing and its external users effectively melts away (Andersen, 1999; Lenihan, 2002). Government becomes a "learning organization," able to respond to the needs of its citizens, who are in turn able to influence public bureaucracies by rapid, aggregative feedback mechanisms such as e-mail and interactive web sites. In contrast to the Fordist technologies, e-government requires a flexible, "build and learn" approach characterized by team working across departmental boundaries via intranets and various forms of groupware (National Audit Office [UK], 1999; Peled, 2001). Although purpose-built systems will certainly continue, the expectation is that use of web-based applications will ensure a measure of openness, fluidity, and seamless integration with civil societal groups. Furthermore, e-government offers an opportunity for public servants to experiment with public sector ICTs in ways that have previously proved difficult, even impossible. With ownership and use of personal computers in the home at their highest ever levels in the United States and Europe, more white-collar workers are familiar with web browsers, the layout of web pages, and the expectations of convenience and relative ease of use that the Internet provides in the home. This form of what we might term *tacit skilling* provides grist to the mill for those who argue that empowerment of public servants as knowledge workers is what will inevitably be a part of putting public services online and ties in with new public management notions of the creative public entrepreneur (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

There are undoubtedly significant political, economic, and technical barriers to the development of government as a learning organization in which information flows freely, empowering both public officials and citizens. In conventional political terms, the sophisticated sharing of data by disparate government agencies presents threats to individual privacy that will be met by resistance, especially as citizens become more aware of the new techniques of surveillance that are being developed in response to electronic communication. E-government zealots bemoan the difficulties of implementing data sharing across government, not only because there is a consensus that improving response times and reducing costs is dependent on removing task duplication across government through such means but also because private sector contractors who sell their systems to private sector organizations rarely come up against the kinds of political opposition that will usually greet such developments in the public sector. There are also less ideologically charged difficulties to do with jurisdiction: Limits exist on the amount and type of information that can be shared across government agencies—a factor with even greater salience in federal systems such as the United States with relatively sophisticated traditions of public law defining what public bodies are permitted to know and reveal about citizens. A further political problem concerns the fear among senior agency officials of massive public scrutiny and dramatic increases in requests for information and what we might term political *leakage* as conflict resolution previously handled within legislatures and in the tensions between legislatures and executives spills over into administrative agencies themselves (Landsbergen & Wolken, 2001). In economic terms, information sharing is likely to impose greater burdens on the public sector at least in the short term. At a time when consumerist expectation of these services among citi-

zens is at a new height, it will prove difficult to demonstrate the obvious pay-offs to a skepti-cal public. And finally, in technical terms, the problem of joining up many different preexist-ing government "legacy" systems has always proved a problematic element in government computing and hangs heavy over e-government reforms, as does the issue of how different agencies define and categorize individual data in the first place.

Despite these problems and a host of others that could no doubt be raised, it is neverthe-less clear that e-government's dominant managerialism (Chadwick & May, 2003) does not necessarily preclude other, more democratic visions. In most "early adopter" states, the tran-sition to a new form of post-Fordist, networked public sector consisting of creative policy development teams permanently plugged in to civil societal networks of citizens and service users is arguably underway. The central questions now are: How far will the process go, and to what extent will it contribute to the democratization of preexisting liberal democratic political systems? I will revisit these questions later. But first, what of that other, full-fledged approach to the uses of ICTs to enhance democracy: e-democracy itself?

THE PROMISE OF E-DEMOCRACY

E-democracy is simpler to describe than it is to realize. Its central themes radically pre-date those of e-government (whose bureaucratic concerns make it very much a creature of the 20th-century administrative state), and it conjures up all manner of dilemmas around the possibility of direct democracy, universal political participation, and popular sovereignty. This is not the place to directly discuss these long-standing problems of democratic theory. Equally, much of the previous literature will be familiar to readers of this journal, so I will very briefly sketch out the two distinct types of Internet-enabled e-democracy that have started to emerge in practice in liberal democratic political systems over the past 10 years or so while adding the caveat that these ideas can easily be traced back to pre-Internet interac-tive technologies such as cable television and telephone conference calls (e.g., Laudon, 1977).

The U.K. Hansard Society—one of the key movers in operationalizing e-democracy—defined it as follows: "The concept . . . is associated with efforts to broaden political partici-pation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their representatives via new information and communication technologies" (Hansard Society, 2003). This simple yet clear definition points to the horizontal linkages between citizens in civil society as well as the vertical linkages between civil societal debates and policy makers. Within this set of relationships, we can delineate two core themes: consultation and deliberation.

When it comes to consultation, ICTs facilitate the communication of citizen opinion to government. Information is a resource that can be used to provide better policy and adminis-tration. By using the speed and immediacy of ICT networks, governments can seek voter opinion on particular issues to guide policy making. The consultative model is sometimes presented as facilitating direct access to government unmediated by special interest groups that may distort opinion, but as Rash (1997), Bimber (1998), and others have shown, it is equally compatible and indeed more likely to jell with a standard pluralist politics.

This type of e-democracy encompasses a continuum of consultation, stretching from low-level information gathering and aggregation toward a fuller quasi-deliberative level of in-teraction. Information is usually regarded as a passive resource; communication by direct question-asking activity is based on the need to generate quantifiable and comparable responses to particular policy innovations. Indeed, frequently the consultative model may only allow inputs that fit within the parameters already set by policy makers. Opinions that

question the basis of policy making itself may be deliberately marginalized or excluded altogether.

Some recent high-profile experiments, such as the 2002 online consultation on the Communications Bill in the United Kingdom (Joint Committee on the Draft Communications Bill, 2003), are much more than the passive submission of information or opinion and begin to incorporate deliberative elements into the consultative process. Whereas consultative e-democracy principally stresses the vertical flows of state-citizen communication, the deliberative type conceives of a more complex, horizontal, and multidirectional interactivity. It is assumed that although the state may facilitate political discussion and interaction, it is but one association among many with a presence in civil society. Other sites of political discourse and interaction have emerged (and will continue to emerge) even though the state may remain the principal target of organized political action. This model contains a recognition that knowledge is discursive, contingent, and changeable; that it emerges through interaction. It has obvious utopian leanings, but at the same time, advocacy of an active civil society need not rest on a desire to sweep away but to augment representative structures. The explosion of interest in social capital during the past 10 years has demonstrated how these themes may enter the political mainstream, often in tandem with an argument about the role of the Internet in producing that elusive resource (see e.g., Hill & Hughes, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Rich, 1999). It is telling that although Fountain (2001) discussed social capital in her book, she was either concerned with its role within bureaucracies or in terms of its contribution to economic innovation among firms (see also Fountain, 1998) rather than its contribution to networks of civic engagement (Putnam, 1993, 2000).

In the participatory model of e-democracy, interaction is regarded as constitutive of democracy itself. Opinion formation and political action based on forums, groups, or new "virtual communities" enlivens and furthers the development of civil society. Quality and density of public debate rather than speed alone is what matters (Hacker, 1996). The principal focus is on voluntary association and the development of new communities of interest, classically celebrated by Howard Rheingold (1993) and others in the mid-1990s but latterly held up by political theorists concerned with what they saw as the development of a Habermasian democratic "public sphere" (Dahlberg, 2001a, 2001b; Habermas, 1962/1989). Here the proliferation of Usenet, bulletin boards, chat rooms, file sharing, and peer-to-peer networking are seen as positive and organic deliberative mechanisms.

In their most optimistic guise, e-democrats argue that online citizens will be able to make use of the information available from nonstate sources to bring pressure to bear on government. Furthermore, eventually all ICT-mediated interactions will help to build a new "cyber civil society" that enhances the participatory potential for all citizens. Thus, the comparatively limited set of interactions typified by consultative e-democracy is characteristic of a period of transition: The "real" cyber society will be participatory in its logic and practice despite the resistance that may be encountered initially. A more gloomy prognosis, but one that still holds to the central tenets of this model, views what are perceived to be two characteristic trends in postindustrial democracies—social fragmentation and single issue politics—as being intensified under the weight of new information networks. The "accelerated pluralism" identified by Bruce Bimber (1998) could never be characterized as utopia, but it still rests on the view that popular participation in groups as citizens come together to assert their demands is made possible in new and different ways by the Internet. Even if online citizen campaigns will occur infrequently and be dominated by those with sufficient resources to mobilize, the theory of potential information used to explain the behavior of members of the U.S. Congress suggests increasing the pool of publicly available information will force political elites to bow to the pressure of potential citizen awareness (Arnold, 1990).

These characteristics of e-democracy are no longer the domain of theoretical speculation and utopian dreaming; they are increasingly embedded in political practice. They have been exhibited in a wide variety of national and local experiments, in many different settings, using different forms of computer-mediated communication. These vary, from the early 1990s experiments in Santa Monica, California (Dutton & Guthrie, 1991), to the mid-1990s emergence of Minnesota E-Democracy (Dahlberg, 2001a), to the very recent prelegislative consultations (mentioned earlier) and other experiments in Britain (e.g., McIntosh, Robson, Smith, & Whyte, 2003) and other initiatives in countries as diverse as Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Estonia (Coleman & Gøtze, 2001). To a greater or lesser extent, they are concerned with deliberation, collaborative information sharing, building social capital, and plugging civil societal networks into established representative and administrative processes at both local and national levels. As such, they share some of the nascent features of e-government and converge with some of the latter's projected democratic effects.

BRINGING E-DEMOCRACY BACK IN

Fountain's (2001) book clearly dissected how new technologies are being used in the service of administrative reform. Electronic service delivery and managerial efficiency are the dominant rationales, and *Building the Virtual State* is driven by this administrative agenda, not by any explicit concern for understanding democratization through the forging of new state-civil societal links. Yet as I have argued, given that democratization is one facet of e-government and is of course at the root of e-democracy itself, there is scope for some convergence of the two. In light of the themes I delineate above, I will consider four probable points of convergence that provide important new areas for future research.

A useful place to start is probably the most obvious: the integration of e-democratic activities in civil society with policy-making processes at local and national levels. Of central importance here is how executive branches may themselves be undergoing transformation and the effects this may have on legislatures. E-government potentially blurs the distinctions between executive and legislative functions by creating opportunities for citizens to have direct political influence on public bureaucracies in ways that have not existed before. This will, of course, throw up its own issues of accountability, not to mention the specter of what the new economy gurus have called *distintermediation*—one of the more useful phrases to have emerged from the dotcom boom. Despite the managerial bias of e-government, there have been attempts to integrate deliberative forums and consultation exercises directly into prelegislative policy discussions (Hansard Society, 2000, 2003). But whether such initiatives are the creatures of executives or of legislatures matters a great deal for how e-government and e-democracy might converge. If government departments continue to establish their own online discussion forums, parliaments will find themselves increasingly marginalized. Awareness of this is (not surprisingly) growing in legislatures that are already comparatively weak for old, nontechnological reasons—in the United Kingdom and Canada, for example. When the U.K. Hansard Society uses the term *e-democracy*, it refers to the direct integration of citizens' online deliberations to inform the behavior of elected representatives in a nonbinding way. It is designed to enhance, not supplant the traditional representative institutions of a liberal democracy. And yet it is clear that unless parliaments seize the initiative, departments and agencies will go their own way in developing managed consultation processes that give legislation the veneer of enhanced legitimacy. It is for this reason that recent experiments in prelegislative online discussion are so interesting (Hansard Society, 2000; Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2002). These pave the way for future

online consultations that plug directly into existing parliamentary and departmental procedures. Their significance lies in the fact that they represent a convergence of what have in the past been dismissed as impractical or even utopian arguments about e-democracy with some very traditional processes of policy making. Moreover, by injecting citizen deliberations into the preexisting relations between executives and legislatures, this form of convergence will mitigate some of the disintermediation effects that may be produced by executive-managed consultations.

A second area concerns the role of both e-government and e-democracy in the internal democratization of the public sector itself. This debate is far from novel. The "centralization" approach to the organizational use of ICTs, led by scholars such as William Dutton, James Danziger, Kenneth Kraemer, and Rob Kling, argues that ICTs do not affect major changes in power structures; they simply reinforce existing inequalities where they exist or may be used to bolster administrative reforms that have already been chosen for other reasons (see e.g., Danziger et al., 1982; Dutton, 1999; Kling & Iacono, 1989; Kraemer & King, 1986). Adopting a well-established "bureaucratic politics" perspective from political science, the centralization school conceives of large organizations as consisting of a range of competing individuals, interests, and constituencies, each seeking to control power resources to further their own ends. In this perspective, as government becomes "informatized," control over how information may be managed and manipulated becomes increasingly central to power struggles. As Peled (2001) put it, managers

> fight so ferociously over computers for three reasons. First, the information contained inside computers often determines which organizational factions will gain or lose power relative to others. Second, computing infrastructure is expensive, and therefore those who control it govern a large investment of the organizational resources. Finally, many people perceive those who are engaged in computing to be sophisticated and professional; hence, computing brings some extra "effective power" to those who own it. (p. 690)

If, as I have outlined earlier, one of the central visions of e-government is of a post-Fordist public sector governance, with networkers empowered by information sharing across departmental boundaries, this is one point on which e-government and e-democracy might converge in such a way that causes a reappraisal of the centralization thesis. Effective and legitimate public policy is based in large part on the information at government's disposal. By suffusing the state with the values of devolved, decentralized, networked governance and emphasizing collaborative, cooperative team working to solve common policy problems, e-government begins to enshrine some of the principal features of e-democracy. Although these may be internal to the state, the emphasis in e-democracy on interfacing with groups outside government has already had an influence on these internal forms, as evidenced in the development of virtual agencies and portal web sites. Flatter hierarchies of more creative and cooperative officials permanently plugged in to wider informational networks that organically include the online presence of citizen groups and affected interests is thus one way of injecting e-democratic practices into e-government.

A third point of convergence arises out of what I will term the *politics of convenience*. We can see at work in e-government reforms—and in governments' new electronic faces more generally (Chadwick, 2001)—the kind of consumerism and lifestyle politics that exist all over cyberspace. In seeking to emulate the private sector by capitalizing on shifts in consumption patterns, especially the practices of e-commerce so celebrated during the dotcom boom at the end of the 1990s, e-government reformists forecast the demise of monolithic and cumbersome state provision. In its stead will emerge a newly flexible and dynamic model of

the public sector that will give users, in all their post-Fordist diversity, what they want, when they want it, and at the lowest possible cost in terms of time and effort. In conditions of relative abundance (relative, that is, to nations outside of the developed West), the consumerist politics of convenience are becoming increasingly important determinants of electoral change and party strategy. The effects of these developments, according to some writers (Norris, 2000), are not the erosion of citizenship values but their metamorphosis into forms more suited to postindustrial politics.

Of course, it may be objected that the politics of convenience have nothing whatsoever to do with democracy, electronic or otherwise; that choice should not be confused with voice. It may depend in large part on the extent to which one is convinced by broader postindustrial arguments about the proliferation of nontraditional repertoires of political activity and whether they can be stretched in this way (Inglehart, 1977, 1990; Norris, 2002). But these problems aside, it does seem perverse to ignore one of the central claims of e-democracy itself: a very old but important argument about scale in a democratic polity. E-democracy renders political participation and influencing the delivery of public services more convenient by shrinking time and distance, enabling large numbers of citizens to deliberate and feed back opinion almost simultaneously. Aligning this value with a new approach to the production and the consumption of public services extends the principle. One could stop there with a classic new public management statement about the benefits of quasi-markets for enhancing customer choice. However, the convergence of e-government with e-democracy may transcend this as customers not only have a greater choice but come to play a role in the design and delivery of public services themselves; in short, how those choices are presented in the first place. Utilizing user feedback mechanisms to improve public services is by no means a new idea, but the simplicity, immediacy, and transparency gained by using Internet-based approaches that allow public services to directly integrate user opinion is a genuinely new development and goes beyond the kind of public-private networks involved in outsourcing that Fountain (2001) described in her case study of the development of a new virtual agency for business users.

A fourth, less obvious area of possible convergence concerns the context for the design and maintenance of the hardware and software that allows e-government systems to run. E-government systems are not neutral; they shape and constrain the types of behavior in which it is possible to engage while interacting with government and other citizens online. A debate is emerging across the public sector (Mathieson, 2003) about the benefits of open-source compared with proprietary systems. For example, in early 2003, the Department for Work and Pensions in the United Kingdom launched an e-procurement system, Purchase and Pay, running on Linux. Open-source software design is predicated on the argument that cooperative and collaborative sharing of expertise results not only in technically better software but also socially and politically progressive technologies that are more flexible, transparent, and cost-effective to maintain. Its chief architect, Richard Stallman, founder of the Free Software Foundation and one of the originators, along with Linus Torvalds and many others, of the free Linux operating system, argues that the public and nonprofit sectors are at risk of being hamstrung by costly and inflexible proprietary systems over which they have little control (GNU Project—Free Software Foundation, 2003). In this perspective, the intrinsically democratic values of open source, which would potentially involve technicians and nonexperts inside and outside government in continuous dialogue to develop and refine e-government and e-democracy systems, would align the public sector with an already existing culture of voluntarism that exists in cyberspace (and that arguably constitutes its foundation). By involving service users, it could also counter accusations of "technocratic" bias that have plagued government technology projects in the past. One example of an area crying out

for open-source style negotiation and collaboration is data sharing and the protection of privacy, especially in light of concerns over the inadequate record of proprietary software companies on consumer privacy. The voluntarist ethic of open source could not only generate cost savings (always important for the public and nonprofit sectors) and more refined software; it will also empower public sector technicians to modify and adapt systems as they see fit and, through online discussions, inject citizens' views on how these systems will operate in the real world.

CONCLUSION

I have outlined, albeit in a preliminary and tentative fashion, how norms and emergent practices of e-democracy and e-government are converging in four areas: online consultations integrating civil societal groups with bureaucracies and parliaments, the internal democratization of the public sector itself, the involvement of users in the design and delivery of public services, and the diffusion of open-source collaboration in public organizations. These now feature as some of the core questions for research in this field and our broader understanding of how ICTs are reshaping governance, the state, and democracy. The genuine "arrival" of the Internet in the mid-1990s potentially caused a paradigm shift. Networks are easier to build and maintain than ever before, and it is much simpler for governments to interface their internal networks with the outside world. The field is crying out for theoretically informed, empirically rich comparative study of these and other developments, and Jane Fountain (2001) provided a valuable contribution. But rather than being driven by an administrative agenda on e-government that perfectly suits existing political and bureaucratic elites, political scientists now need to provide qualitative analyses that explore and hasten this potential fusion of administrative reform and democratization.

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