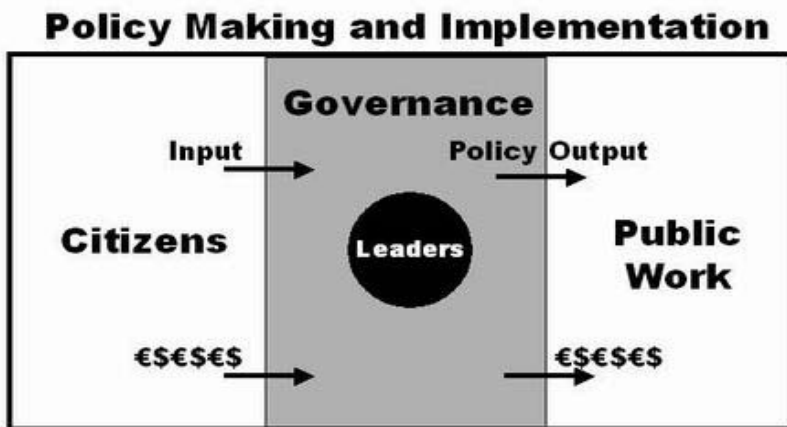# E-Democracy, E-Governance and Public Net-Work

STEVEN CLIFT

Introduction*

While the art and practice of government policy-making, citizen participation, and public work is quite complex, the following illustration provides a simple framework used in this paper:

In this model of traditional government policy-making:
- Citizens provide occasional input between elections and pay taxes.
- Power in the Governance infrastructure is centered with political leaders who determine broad policy priorities and distribute resources based on those priorities and existing programs and legal requirements.
- Through government directly, and other publicly funded organizations, Public Work represents the implementation of the policy agenda and law.

Over time of course, bureaucratic barriers to reform make it difficult for leaders to recognize changes in citizen needs and priorities. Citizen input, outside of elections, often has a difficult time getting through. Disconnects among citizens, leaders, and those who implement public work are often based on the inability to easily communicate through and across these groups.

As our one-way broadcast world becomes increasingly two-way, will the governance process gain the ability to listen and respond more effectively?

The information-age, led by Internet content, software, technology, and connectivity, is changing society and the way we can best meet public challenges. E-democracy, e-governance, and public net-work are three interrelated concepts that will help us map out our opportunity to more effectively participate, govern, and do public work.

E-Democracy

E-democracy is a term that elicits a wide range of reactions. Is it part of an inevitable technology driven revolution? Will it bring about direct voting on every issue under the sun via the Internet? Is this just a lot of hype? And so on. (The answers … no, no, and no.)

Just as there are many different definitions of democracy and many more operating practices, e-democracy as a concept is easily lost in the clouds. Developing a practical definition of E-Democracy is essential to help us sustain and adapt everyday representative democratic governance in the information age.

Definition

After a decade of involvement in this field, I have established the following working definition:

E-Democracy is the use of information and communications technologies and strategies by "democratic sectors" within the political processes of local communities, states/regions, nations and on the global stage.

The "democratic sectors" include the following democratic actors:
- Governments
- Elected officials
- Media (and major online Portals)
- Political parties and interest groups
- Civil society organizations
- International governmental organizations
- Citizens/voters

Current E-Democracy Activities

Each sector often views its new online developments in isolation. They are relatively unaware of the online activities of the other sectors. Those working to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) to improve or enhance democratic practices are finding e-democracy a lot more challenging to implement than speculating on its potential. This is why it is essential for the best e-democracy lessons and practices to be documented and shared.

This simplified model illustrates e-democracy activities as a whole. Building on the first diagram, it sits as a filter on the "input" border between citizens and governance in first diagram:

E-Democracy Conceptual Model
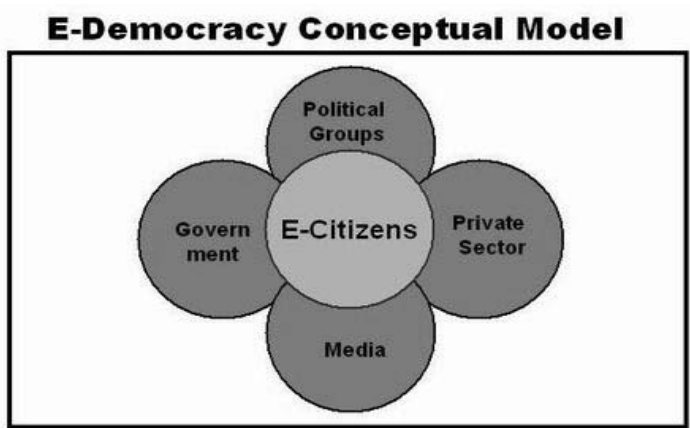
Governments provide extensive access to information and interact electronically with citizens, political groups run online advocacy campaigns and political parties campaign online, and the media and portal/search sites play a crucial role in providing news and online navigation. In this model, the "Private Sector" represents commercially driven connectivity, software, and technology. This is the whole of e-democracy.

E-democracy is not evolving in a vacuum with these sectors only. Technology enhancements and online trends from all corners of the Internet are continuously being adopted and adapted for political and governance purposes. This is one of the more exciting opportunities as e-mail, wireless networking, personalization, weblogs, and other tools move in from other online content, commerce, and technology areas and bring innovation and the opportunity for change with them.

Looking to the center of model, the only ones who experience "e-democracy" as a whole are "citizens." In more "wired" countries most citizens are experiencing information-age democracy as "e-citizens" at some level of governance and public life. In developing countries, e-democracy is just as important, but exists as more of an institution-to-institution relationship. In all countries, the influence of "e-democracy" actually reaches most of the public through its influence on the traditional media and through word of mouth via influential members of the community.

"E-Citizens" – Greater Citizen Participation?

To many, e-democracy suggests greater and more active citizen participation enabled by the Internet, mobile communications, and other technologies in today's representative democracy. It also suggests a different role for government and more participatory forms of direct citizen involvement in efforts to address public challenges. (Think e-volunteerism over e-voting.)

Some take this further and view the information revolution as an inherently democratic "disruptive technology" that will dramatically change politics for the better. This view has diminished considerably, as existing democratic actors have demonstrated their ability to incorporate new technologies and online communication

strategies into their own activities and protect their existing interests. They have to in order to survive.

In the future, most "e-democracy" development will naturally result from ICT-accelerated competition among the various political forces in society. We are experiencing a dramatic "e-democracy evolution." In this evolution, the role, interests, and the current and future activities of all actors is not yet well understood. There is still an opportunity to influence its development for the better.

Things will change, but as each democratic sector advances their online activities, democratic intent will be required to achieve the greater goals of democracy[1].

E-Governance

I use the phrase "Representative E-Government" to describe the e-democracy activities of government institutions. Others call this "e-governance." Whether a local government or a United Nations agency, government institutions are making significant investments in the use of ICTs in their work. They are expressing "democratic intent." Their efforts make this one of the most dynamic and important areas of e-democracy development.

There are distinct differences in how representative institutions and elected officials use ICTs compared to administrative agencies and departments. The use of ICTs by parliaments, heads of state/government, and local councils (and elected officials in these institutions) lags significantly behind the administrative-based e-government service and portal efforts. This is a services first, democracy later approach.

This focus of e-government resources on services does not mean that e-democracy is not gaining increased attention in some governments. In fact, leading e-service governments are now at a point where they are exploring their e-democracy responsibilities more seriously.

Goals for E-Democracy in Governance

Investment in traditional e-government service delivery is justified based on the provision of greater citizen convenience and the often-elusive goal of cost-savings. Goals for e-government in governance that promote democracy and effective governance include:

- Improved government decisions
- Increased citizen trust in government
- Increased government accountability and transparency
- Ability to accommodate the public will in the information-age
- To effectively involve stakeholders, including NGOs, business, and interested citizen in new ways of meeting public challenges (see public net-work below)

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[1]   Related resources: http://www.publicus.net/articles/edemresources.html; http://www.publicus.net /articles/future.html; http://www.publicus.net/ebook.

Consultation Online

The first area of government e-democracy exploration has focused on consultation within executive policy-making processes. Governments, like the United Kingdom and Canada, are taking their consultative frameworks and adapting them to the online environment. New Zealand and Canada now have special portals dedicated to promote the open consultations across their governments. This includes traditional off-line opportunities as well as those where online input is encouraged. Across the UK, a number of "online consultations" have been deployed to gather special citizen input via the Internet.

Examples:
- Consulting Canadians[2]
- New Zealand – Participate[3]
- UK E-Democracy Consultation[4]
- Others, including hosting and best practice tips[5]

Accountability, Trust, the Public Will

These three themes are emerging on the e-democracy agenda. Building government accountability and transparency are a significant focus of e-government in many developing countries. E-government is viewed an anti-corruption tool in places like South Korea, Mexico, and others. Trust, while an important goal, can only be measured in the abstract. Establishing a causal relationship between e-government/e-democracy experiences and increased levels of trust will be difficult.

Ultimately, the main challenge for governance in the information age will be accommodating the will of the people in many small and large ways online. The great unknown is whether citizen and political institutional use of this new medium will lead to more responsive government or whether the noise generated by competing interests online will make governance more difficult. It is possible that current use of ICTs in government and politics, which are often not formulated with democratic intent, will actually make governance less responsive.

One thing is clear, the Internet can be used to effectively organize protests and to support specific advocacy causes. Whether it was the use of e-mail groups and text messaging protesting former President Estrada of the Philippines or the fact a majority of Americans online sent or received e-mail (mostly humor) after the Presidential election "tie" in the United States, major moments in history lead to an explosion of online activity. The social networks online are very dynamic and governments need to be prepared to accommodate and react to "electric floods." When something happens that causes a flood, people will expect government to engage them via this medium or citizens will instead view government as increasingly unresponsive and disconnected with society they are to serve[6].

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2   Http://www.consultingcanadians.gc.ca.
3   Http://www.govt.nz/en/participate.
4   Http://www.e-democracy.gov.uk.
5   Http://www.publicus.net/articles/consult.html.
6   For more on the e-government and democracy, watch for the 2003 United Nations World Public Sector Report. Details will be shared on DoWire: http://www.e-democracy.org/do.

Top Ten E-Democracy "To Do List" for Governments Around the World

1. Announce all public meetings online in a systematic and reliable way. Include the time, place, agenda, and information on citizen testimony, participation, or observation options. Use the Internet to build trust in in-person democracy.

2. Put a "Democracy Button" on your site's top page which brings them to a special section detailing the agencies/government units purpose and mission, top decision-makers, links to enabling laws, budget details and other accountability information. Share real information that help a citizen better understand the legitimacy of your government agency and powers. Give citizens real information on how to best influence the policy course of the agency. This could include links to the appropriate parliamentary or local council committees and bodies.

3. Implement "Service Democracy." Yes, most citizens simply want better, more efficient access to service transactions and information products your agency produces. Learn from these relationships. Actively use comment forms, online surveys, citizen focus groups to garner the input required to be a responsive e-government. Don't automate services that people no longer want or need. Use the Internet to learn about what you can do better and not just as a one-way self-service tool designed to limit public interaction and input.

4. End the "Representative Democracy Online Deficit." With the vast majority of government information technology spending focused on the administrative side government, the representative institutions from the local level on up to the Federal government are growing increasingly weak. Invest in the technology and communications infrastructure of those institutions designed to represent the people. Investing in elected officials' voice through technology is investing in the voice of the people. Cynicism aside, options for more direct democracy can be explored, but invest in what we have today – representative democracy.

5. Internet-enable existing representative and advisory processes. Create "Virtual Committee Rooms" and public hearings that allow in-person events to be available in totality via the Internet. Require in-person handouts and testimony to be submitted in HTML for immediate online availability to those watching or listening on the Internet or via broadcasting. Get ready to datacast such items via digital television. Encourage citizens to also testify via the Internet over video conferencing and allow online submission of written testimony. The most sustainable "e-democracy" activities will be those incorporated into existing and legitimate governance processes.

6. Embrace the two-way nature of the Internet. Create the tools required to respond to e-mail in an effective and timely manner. E-mail is the most personal and cherished Internet tool used by the average citizen. How a government deals with incoming e-mail and enables access to automatic informational notices based on citizen preferences will differentiate popular govern-

ments from those that are viewed as out of touch. Have a clear e-mail response policy and start by auto-responding with the time and date received, the estimated time for a response, what to do if none is received, and a copy of their original message. Give people the tools to help hold you accountable.

7. Hold government sponsored online consultations. Complement in-person consultations with time-based, asynchronus online events (one to three weeks) that allow people to become educated on public policy issues and interact with agency staff, decision-makers, and each other. Online consultations must be highly structured events designed to have a real impact on the policy process. Don't do this for show. The biggest plus with these kinds of events is that people may participate on their own time from homes, schools, libraries and workplaces and greater diversity of opinions, perspectives, and geography can increase the richness of the policy process. Make clear the government staff response permissions to allow quick responses to informational queries. Have a set process to deal with more controversial topics in a very timely (24–48 hours) fashion with direct responses from decision-makers and top agency staff. Do this right and your agency will want to do this at least quarterly every year,, do it wrong the first time and it will take quarter of a century to build the internal support for another try. Check on the work in Canada, The Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom in particular and you'll discover government that are up to some exciting work.

8. Develop e-democracy legislation. Tweak laws and seek the budgetary investments required to support governance in information age. Not everything can be left voluntary – some government entities need a push. What is so important that government must be required to comply? There is a limit to what can be squeezed out of existing budgets. Even with the infrastructure in place the investment in the online writers, communicators, designers, programmers, and facilitators must be increased to make Internet-enhanced democracy something of real value to most citizens and governments alike.

9. Educate elected officials on the use of the Internet in their representative work. Get them set-up technologically and encourage national and international peer-to-peer policy exchanges among representatives and staff. Be careful to prevent use this technology infrastructure for incumbency protection. Have well designed laws or rules to prevent use of technology and information assets in unknown ways. Don't be overly restrictive, but e-mail gathered by an elected official's office shouldn't suddenly be added to a campaign e-mail list. Be sure the tell them to read the "Top Ten Tips for Wired Elected Officials".

10. Create open source democracy online applications. Don't waste tax dollars on unique tools required for common governmental IT and democracy needs. Share your best in-house technology with other governments around the world. Leverage your service infrastructure, be it proprietary or open source, for democratic purposes. With vast resources being spent on making administrative government more efficient, a bit of these resources should be

used "inefficiently." Democracy is the inefficiency in decision-making and the exercise of power required for the best public choices and outcomes. Even intentional democratic inefficiency can be made more effective with IT.

Top Ten Tips for "Weos" – Wired Elected Officials

1. Use the Internet to communicate.
   Whether it is private one-to-one or public group communication, interaction is the most transformative and powerful political application on the Internet. Speech on the Internet is meaningless unless there is free electronic association.

2. Use the Internet to disseminate information.
   Whether as part of your official duties or party/campaign work, encourage your constituents or political supporters to join your one-way e-mail list(s). The web is passive from an organizers perspective because people rarely visit the same site twice. You want people to join or "opt-in" to your e-mail lists so you can share your message widely little or no cost.

3. Develop multiple e-mail address identities on the Internet.
   Have one e-mail address for public official constituent communication, one internal address for official government work, and at least one personal e-mail address for unofficial campaign/party political communication and other personal communication.

4. Promote "E-Democracy" within your existing representative structures to enable "wired" public participation.
   Take your existing processes such as committee hearings, public testimony, constituent communication and adapt them to the information age. Active integration of information and communication technology into legally representative democracy is essential to maintain legitimacy and improve democracy. Pass model "E-Democracy laws" that require representative and consultative features of the administrative side of government and other government bodies to be fully accessible online. Start by requiring that all public meeting notices and agendas be posted online through a uniform system.

5. Use the Internet to connect with peers around the world.
   The Internet is a terrific way to establish intentional and value-added opportunities for peer-to-peer information sharing among people with similar interests or goals. Take any public policy topic of interest and create networks for you and your staff. Don't wait for others to build global policy network of elected officials. Become a known global expert in a topic area by taking the initiative now.

6. Use the Internet to access information.
   It is an information maze out there. Be patient and you will often find what you need. Use your peer connections and assist each other with research requests and needs. Sending a query to the group will often result in references to useful information just as proactively sharing the results of your online research will provide value to others. Think of this as "just-in-time-democra-

cy" through the use of your expert and other's online "best practitioner" networks.

7. Use the Internet to access information smartly.
   Settle on a search engine like Google[7] and subject trees like the Open Directory[8] and Yahoo[9]. Learn how they work. Find similar sites by reverse searching – for example "link: http://www.e-democracy.org" will find all pages indexed at Google linking to that page. Try the reverse search to find our who links to your site.

8. Use the Internet to be fed information automatically.
   Subscribe to select e-mail newsletters and announcements list on the web sites you find most useful. Let them tell you when they have something new. Use e-mail filtering (ask your technical staff for help) to sort your incoming e-mail into different folders to keep e-mail list messages separate from e-mail sent personally to you.

9. Use the Internet for intelligence.
   Whether it is a site you find useful or the site of your political opponents, use the Internet to monitor their public activities and documents. You can use tools like Spy On It[10] to set automatic page watchers that will notify you when something new is posted on a web site. Some of the best public policy information is not promoted beyond placement on a web page. Let a web reminder tell you something has been changed or added.

10. Promote integrated services for all elected officials across the organization.
    Uniform systems, networks, and equipment should be overhead covered by the representative institution itself and not a cost to members directly (at least for the essential technology base). This is a balance of power issue. If the administrative side of government invests billions in their information infrastructure, the representative side must invest as well to remain a relevant voice for an increasingly wired society. The same goes for those in political party based elections – promote an integrated and aggregated campaign information infrastructure that may be used securely and strategically by all party candidates.

Public Net-Work

Public net-work is a new concept. It represents the strategic use of ICTs to better implement established public policy goals and programs through direct and diverse stakeholder involvement online.

If e-democracy in government represents input into governance, then public net-work represents participative output using the same or similar online tools. Public net-work is a selective, yet public, approach that uses two-way online information exchange to carry out previously determined government policy.

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[7]   Http://google.com.
[8]   Http://dmoz.org.
[9]   Http://yahoo.com.
[10] Http://spyonit.com.

Building on the first diagram, the following "bow-tie" model suggests a more fluid communication environment that can be used to bring citizens and public work stakeholders closer to the center of governance. It also suggests that policy leaders can reach out and develop closer relationships with citizens and stakeholders.
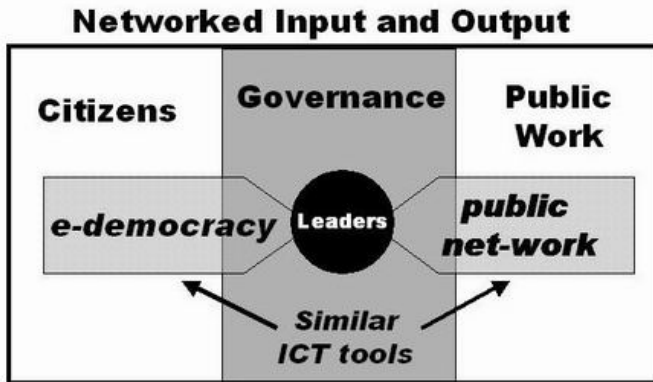
What are public net-work projects?

Public net-work projects have the following things in common:

1. They are designed to facilitate the online exchange of information, knowledge and/or experience among those doing similar public work.
2. They are hosted or funded by government agencies, intergovernmental associations, international government bodies, partnerships involving many public entities, non-governmental organizations, and sometimes foundations or companies.
3. While they are generally open to the public, they are focused on specific issues that attract niche stakeholder involvement from other government agencies, local governments, non-governmental organizations, and interested citizens. Essentially any individual or group willing to work with the government to meet public challenges may be included. However, invite-only initiatives with a broader base of participants are very similar to more strictly defined "open" public net-work initiatives.
4. In a time of scare resources, public net-work is designed to help governments more effectively pursue their established missions in a collaborative and sustainable manner.

In order to work, public net-work initiative hosts need to shift from the role of "top experts" or "sole providers" of public services to facilitators of those working to solve similar public problems. Public net-work moves beyond "one-way" information and service delivery toward "two-way" and "many-to-many" exchange of information, knowledge, and experience.

Features

Publicly accessible public net-work projects currently use a mix of ICT tools available. The successful projects adopt new technologies and strategies on an incremental trial and error basis. Unleashing all of the latest tools and techniques without a user base may actually reduce project momentum and user participation.

To succeed, these projects must adapt emerging models of distributed information input and information sharing and develop models for sustained knowledge exchange/discussion. They must also build from the existing knowledge about online communities, virtual libraries, e-newsletters, and Communities of Practice/Interest.

Some of the specific online features include:

1. Topical Portal – The starting point for public net-work is a web site that provides users a directory to relevant information resources in their field – these often include annotated subject guide links and/or standard Yahoo-style categories.
2. E-mail Newsletter –. Most projects keep people up-to-date via regularly produced e-mail newsletters. This human edited form of communication is essential to draw people back to the site and can be used to foster a form of high value interaction that helps people feel like they are part of the effort.
3. Personalization with E-mail Notification – Some sites allow users to create personal settings that track and notify them about new online resources of interest. New resources and links to external information are often placed deep within an overall site and "What's New" notification dramatically increases the value provided by the project to its users.
4. Event Calendar – Many sites are a reliable place to discover listings of key current events and conferences.
5. FAQ and Question Exchange – A list of answers to frequently asked questions as well as the regular solicitation of new or timely questions from participants. Answers are then gathered from other participants and shared with all via the web site and/or e-newsletter.
6. Document Library – Some sites move beyond the portal directory function and gather the full text of documents. This provides a reliable long-term source of quality content that often appears and is removed from other web sites without notice.
7. Discussions – Using a mix of e-mail lists and/or web forums, these sites encourage ongoing and informal information exchange. This is where the "life" of the public net-work online community is often expressed.
8. Other features include news headline links from outside sources, a member directory, and real-time online features.

Examples

- CommunityBuilders New South Wales[11]
- International AIDS Economics Network[12]

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[11] Http://www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au.
[12] Http://www.iaen.org.

- OneFish[13]
- DevelopmentGateway[14]
- Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry – Digital New Deal[15]
- UK Improvement and Development Agency – Knowledge[16]

Lessons

1. Government partnerships, with their public missions and resources, often make ideal hosts for broad, horizontal information exchange. Government departments that feel their status/purpose will be threatened by shifting from an expert gatekeeper to an involved facilitator are not ideal hosts.

2. All online features must be designed with the end user in mind. They must be usable and easy to learn. Complex systems reduce the size of the participatory audience – public net-work cannot rely on an internal office environment where people are required to learn new systems or use specialty software beyond e-mail and a web browser. To provide a strong incentive, these systems must save the time it takes those implementing public policy to do their job effectively.

3. Public net-work sites broaden the awareness of quality information resources on a timely basis. Finding what you need, when you need it is more likely to occur when a community of interest participates in building a comprehensive resource. However, over time these sites will naturally face currency issues that must be handled. There are limits to the value of information exchange. Too much information, or bad information, can paralyze decision-making or distract people from the task at hand. All good things should be taken in moderation.

4. Building trust among the organizations and individuals participating in the development and everyday use of a collaborative site is essential. This relates to developing the "neutral host" facilitation role, along with sustained funding, by the host. Special care must be taken when building partner relationships and host "branding" kept to a minimum. Partnerships, with clear responsibilities and goals, will better position efforts as a truly participatory community projects.

5. Gathering and sharing incentives, particularly for resource links is a particularly tricky area. Involving people with solid librarianship and communication skill sets is essential. Creating a more sustainable model where participants more actively submit information (e.g. seeking submissions from users for more than 5% of link listings for example) is an ongoing challenge. In-kind partnerships where staff time is donated may be more effective than relying on the time of unaffiliated individual volunteers. With more localized efforts, individual volunteers may be the best or only option.

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[13] Http://www.onefish.org.
[14] Http://www.developmentgateway.org.
[15] Http://dnd.rieti.go.jp.
[16] Http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk.

6. Informal information sharing has tremendous potential. To effectively encourage horizontal communication, facilitation is often required. Projects must leverage existing online communities and be willing to use technologies, like e-mail lists if that is what people will actually use. In my opinion, the CommunityBuilder.NSW site is one of the few sites that effectively integrate e-mail and web technology to support sustained online deliberation and information exchange.

7. The connection to decision-makers and authority is significant. Government-led public net-work projects require political leadership and strong management support. Paradoxically, an effective online involvement program on the implementation side of government, if connected to government leaders, may operate as an "early warning system" and allow government to adapt policy with fewer political challenges[17].

Conclusion

To be involved in defining the future of democracy, governance and public work at the dawn of the information-age is an incredible opportunity and responsibility. With the intelligent and effective application of ICTs, combined with democratic intent, we can make governments more responsive, we can connect citizens to effectively meet public challenges, and ultimately, we can build a more sustainable future for the benefit of the whole of society and world in which we live.

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[17] The public net-work section above is based on an article I wrote for the OECD's E-Government Working Group. An expanded discussion of case examples and the future direction of public net-work is available in Public Net-work: Online Information Exchange in the Pursuit of Public Service Goals: http//www.publicus.net/articles/oecdpublicnetwork.rtf.