Local e-government and citizen participation: case studies from Australia and Italy

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E–Government Success around the World:
Cases, Empirical Studies, and Practical Recommendations

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Chapter 12
Local E–Government and Citizen Participation: Case Studies from Australia and Italy

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ABSTRACT
This chapter explores local e-government and the provision of online spaces for citizen participation. It highlights how different approaches to e-government development and implementation contribute to the likely success of participatory practices in informing decision-making and enhancing civic engagement with government. A comparative examination is drawn from the experiences of two local governments – the City of Casey in Australia and the Italian City of Bologna. The City of Casey’s e-government prioritises service delivery, with opportunities for participation largely restricted. In contrast, the City of Bologna facilitates two-way online citizen discourse and deliberation, which is used to enhance public policy. This chapter highlights that institutional contexts, including insufficient policies and the understandings and motives of political actors, affect the development of participatory e-government and the use of citizen contributions in decision-making. It suggests that successfully facilitating civic participation and engagement through e-government requires strong policy frameworks guiding online content and applications, and a broader change in governmental culture so that representatives are receptive to civic views.

INTRODUCTION
Throughout the world, governments are developing their use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for e-government practices. New technologies, particularly the Internet, can aid information dissemination, enhance service delivery, and enable greater transparency and accountability of government operations. The success of e-government ventures will vary depending on the specific aims of individual initiatives, the government body and its citizenry, and the sup-
Local e-government initiatives often lag behind applications implemented by state and federal authorities due to resource limitations or a lack of recognition of the potential value of advanced online practices (Seifert, 2006; Cohen, van Geenhuizen, & Nijkamp, 2005). Local governments frequently prioritise one-way online practices and increased service delivery functions, which offer the greatest economic rewards for councils (see Beynon-Davies & Martin, 2004). Many councils are, however, now recognising the need to advance their online initiatives to take advantage of two-way possibilities for exchange, sharing and collaboration. This chapter highlights how different approaches to e-government development impact upon citizen participation practices. It suggests that, to be effective, online participation must inform decision-making processes, as it is this that facilitates greater engagement with government.

This chapter details the experiences of two local governments – the City of Casey (Casey) in Australia and the Italian City of Bologna (Bologna) – and the way each has developed online practices. Casey and Bologna were selected because each has taken a different approach to e-government with substantial variations in the intended use of online communications, but both began their online development at a similar time. Casey’s e-government has followed a linear transition, initially using a website for greater transparency of government information, then progressing to enable limited interactivity and improved service delivery. While the council is beginning to recognise the need to include opportunities for dialogue and exchange with citizens through e-government, current forms of two-way online involvement appear largely tokenistic and do not yet facilitate citizen participation in decision-making processes. In contrast, Bologna began its e-government development with a strong focus on local democracy and the need for citizen contributions to inform public policy. While the government faced many challenges to its online development, it continues to provide and continually updates spaces for civic inclusion, and offers a sound example of how to effectively facilitate civic engagement through e-government. This chapter suggests that, to successfully develop its e-government practices to facilitate increased citizen participation and engagement as Bologna has done, Casey will require both stronger policy frameworks guiding the development of its online content and applications, and a change in its governmental culture to be more receptive and responsive to civic input. First, however, this chapter offers a discussion of the importance of local e-government specifically, and provides a distinction between the concepts of ICT-enabled interaction, participation and engagement.

BACKGROUND

While there are numerous understandings and definitions of electronic government, it is broadly understood as the use of networked ICTs such as the Internet and mobile telephony in government operations (see Mayer-Schönberger & Lazer, 2007; Moon, 2002). Early perspectives on e-government often focused on the potential of new technologies to facilitate information dissemination and improved service delivery, viewing citizens as clients or customers (see, for example, Silcock, 2001; Ho, 2002; Kunstelj & Vintar, 2004). More recently, there has been a shift away from the bureaucratic focus of e-government initiatives towards more citizen-centric applications (Norris, 2005; Homburg, 2008; Luna-Reyes, Gil-Garcia, & Celorio Mansi, 2011). Emphasis has been placed on the capacity of e-government to facilitate two-way communication between citizens and governments (Norris, 2005). Such functions have
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been recognised as producing broader effects on governmental processes, such as increased transparency of government operations, greater accountability of decision-making, and helping to build civic trust in governments (see Eggers, 2005; Wong & Welch, 2004; Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2012; Griffin & Halpin, 2005; Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012). Furthermore, the concept of ‘engagement’ enabled by e-government has emerged as a key research area (Reece, 2006).

This chapter focuses on the way that local governments can facilitate citizen participation and engagement through e-government practices. Neo-liberal tendencies in Western developed economies have meant that the majority of local e-government initiatives followed the path of e-commerce (Graham & Aurigi, 1997; Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2009; Homburg, 2008). Local government websites initially offered increased access to information, and then slowly progressed to incorporate and capitalise on the Internet’s interactive nature, primarily to enable administrative and financial transactions (Ho, 2002; Flamm, Chaudhuri, et al., 2006). While many e-government websites commonly remain in this state today, the pervasiveness of ICTs in citizens’ everyday lives, enabling greater exchange and collaboration, is creating a demand for governments to adapt their practices to incorporate more two-way participation methods through, for example, discussion boards, wikis and blogs. Such spaces act as contexts for the articulation of citizen involvement to action (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007), enabling citizen participation to influence democratic decision-making and facilitating increased engagement with representatives.

Local governments offer a useful setting for the development of such online spaces for citizen participation (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2012). As the closest democratic representatives to citizens, local governments are responsible for enhancing citizenship practices by offering improved methods for civic participation (Pratchett, 1999). This task is aided by increased knowledge of the needs and concerns of local citizens, existing infrastructure, and of the issues directly affecting the local area and population. Couldry and Langer (2005) note that citizens perceive democratic participation to exist primarily at the local level. The increased sense of immediacy and familiarity with local issues encourages active involvement because citizens can see the direct implications and relevance of political participation for their everyday lives (Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2009). Local e-government practices can therefore draw from the common understandings and experiences of distinct community groups to drive online participation (see Graham & Aurigi, 1997). Online discourse and deliberation is also more manageable on a smaller scale than that which takes place through state or federal governments (see Jimenez, Mossberger, & Wu, 2012). These observations suggest that local governments hold a key position for targeted, participatory e-government development.

Despite these advantages, local governments are often the slowest to adapt their practices through the use of new technologies and struggle to cope with rapid changes in the communications environment (see Seifert, 2006; Gil-Garcia & Martinez-Moyano, 2007; Edmiston, 2003; Norris, 2007). Local governments may lack the necessary skills, resources and knowledge to develop participatory e-government practices (Cohen et al., 2005). Existing organisational tendencies are reinforced through the frequent prioritisation of online service delivery improvements, which offer the greatest chance of economic gains to councils by, for example, minimising the number of staff hours needed for customer services (see Beynon-Davies & Martin, 2004; Hale, Musso, & Weare, 1999; Shackleton, Fisher, & Dawson, 2005). But this focus results in online initiatives that fail to provide “opportunities for citizens to participate and exert influence on local issues and decisions” (Leach & Pratchett, 2005, p. 323).

This chapter suggests how e-government practices that facilitate citizen participation can be suc-
cessfully developed and implemented at the local level. It outlines the autonomous development of online practices by two local governments—Casey and Bologna—highlighting the limitations and benefits of the approaches used for increased citizen participation and engagement. First, however, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of interaction, participation and engagement, as each is often ill-defined and used interchangeably for analytical purposes.

**Interaction, Participation and Engagement**

Technological developments bring new possibilities for interaction, participation and engagement through e-government practices. Interaction can be understood as an exchange function of any available communication process (mediated or non-mediated), although it is often only associated with new communications technologies, particularly the Internet, as they provide substantially more avenues for interaction than previous technologies (see Kiousis, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2000).

Stromer-Galley (2004) identifies the differences between the types of interactivity available through ICTs. She ascertains that ‘interactivity-as-product’ occurs between people and computers or networks (user and technology), and that ‘interactivity-as-process’ occurs between multiple people with the aid of computers (human interaction).1 In the context of e-government, Stromer-Galley’s (2004) distinction illustrates that current government ICT use that focuses on e-services can be considered as interactivity-as-product. In terms of service delivery, interactivity-as-product substantially reduces the need for government officials or administrators to deal extensively or interpretively with enquiries. As such, interactivity-as-product applications are more attractive to governments than interactivity-as-process as they reduce the number of staff hours needed to deal with citizen enquiries. Increasing interactivity-as-product does not, however, equate with improved forms of participation. Interactivity-as-process helps to provide a stronger connection between citizens and their representatives through the aid of communications technology, and it is this form of interaction that relates to civic participation and engagement mechanisms.

Interaction may not equate with participation, but interaction is needed in order for participation to occur. The forms of interaction enabled by different communication technologies shape the way participation takes place. Yet, the concept of political participation itself exists independently of the communication medium that enables it. For example, postal voting, voting at a polling booth and e-voting can be considered the same type of political participation but these occur through different means. A citizen paying rates can do so in person, over the telephone or online, but they are still undertaking the same practice. However, as technological capacity for interaction increases so do opportunities for additional forms of direct participation. This point highlights the importance of using networked digital communications technologies to facilitate more direct avenues of two-way civic participation. In terms of local community-based participation, Burns, Heywood, Taylor, Wilde, and Wilson (2004) indicate that participation can be understood as citizens playing an active part in the decisions that affect their lives, requiring a significant degree of power to exert influence (see also Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2009).

In a broad sense, the concept of civic engagement can be considered in terms of citizens paying attention to politics and being provided with opportunities to become actively involved in public issues (Couldry et al., 2007). Norris (2001) outlines three specific dimensions to civic engagement:

1. **Political Knowledge**—what people learn about public affairs;
2. **Political Trust**—the public’s orientation of support for the political system and its actors; and
3. Political Participation – activities designed to influence government and the decision-making process. (Norris, 2001, p. 217)

ICTs can be used to develop each of these engagement dimensions through e-government. For example, knowledge of political issues and public affairs can be spread through websites, trust is built through new forms of connection between citizens and their representatives, and ICTs facilitate two-way dialogue, which can be used in decision-making. Online civic engagement therefore involves the availability of information, service delivery and participatory practices, coupled with citizens’ trust and willingness to use online mechanisms (see Chen & Dimitrova, 2008). While Norris’ (2001) three dimensions of civic engagement interrelate, the participation component, being directly concerned with citizens’ capacity to influence government decision-making, is the primary focus of this chapter’s examination of local e-government, given that participation itself requires both knowledge and trust. Conversely, Damodaran, Olphert, and Balatsoukas (2008) highlight that participation aids in building both knowledge and trust. The following section details the methodological approach of this research.

METHODOLOGY

Research into the Australian local government, the City of Casey, followed a grounded methodological approach, which privileges the formation of theoretical analysis from empirical data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A variety of research methods were used to aid broad understanding into local e-government and to ensure the validity of findings by enabling analytical comparisons between different research methods.

The City of Casey’s online practices were examined to establish the one-way or two-way nature of the initiatives employed for citizens and statistical evidence of Casey’s website usage was provided by the local government. Document analysis of Casey’s policies and strategies was undertaken to illustrate the impact of official documents on council operations and the development and implementation of e-government practices (see Ritchie, 2003; Esmark & Triantafillou, 2007). As the City of Casey does not have an e-government or Internet policy (to-date) that specifically governs its online content and applications or that guides future development, it was necessary to more broadly look at council documents to determine how (if at all) they influence local e-government. Documents were selected for examination if they related to council operations, infrastructure development, government-citizen communications, ICT in general, or citizen participation. Documents within these themes were determined the most likely to impact e-government within the municipality, enabling explanation of existing practices and theorisation of potential improvements.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five of Casey’s eleven councillors during 2008 to uncover their understandings and experiences in relation to both e-government practices and the importance of citizen participation in local political processes (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Each participant had at least three years of experience on council, with two interviewees having served as representatives for more than a dozen years. Four of the five interviewed councillors had held the position of City of Casey Mayor, and each represented a different ward within the municipality. There was also at least one representative interviewed from each of the three political parties on council (Labor, Liberal, and Independent). Whilst a small sample size, the experience and diversity of the interviewees allows for broad insight and understanding into the factors impacting on Casey’s e-government.

In Australia, the Federal Government is investing in the ubiquitous provision of high-speed broadband Internet infrastructure through optic fibre, fixed wireless and satellite technologies
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(see www.nbn.gov.au). In order to capitalise on this improved infrastructure, the government developed a National Digital Economy Strategy (Department of Broadband, Communications, & the Digital Economy (DBCDE), 2011). In terms of e-government, an aim of this strategy is to have four out of five Australians choosing to engage with governments online by the year 2020. This is a significant goal given that the infrastructure needed to achieve it is not scheduled for completion until the same year. This goal recognises that local governments hold a key position in driving greater digital engagement in communities (DBCDE, 2011). However, the Federal Government has not provided any suggestions or recommendations to local authorities on how to advance their online practices to facilitate greater engagement. Opportunities for online participation through local e-government are currently largely limited within Australia, with the bulk of local initiatives focused on improved information dissemination and service delivery (see, for example, O’Toole, 2007; 2009; Tiecher & Dow, 2002). In order to progress online practices to meet the goal set by the Federal Government, Australian local governments can draw from experiences elsewhere to help ensure that new online opportunities facilitate increased citizen engagement. For this reason, an international comparison was necessary for this investigation as it provides beneficial insight into the development of well-established and successful online engagement opportunities.

Bologna’s Iperbole e-government project offers an early instructive example of government ICT use, which has been well documented and is widely recognised as an innovative local initiative that emphasises administrative transparency and encourages civic participation in public policy to enhance local democracy (see, for example, Di Maria & Rizzo, 2005; Guidi, 2009; Nesti & Valentini, 2010). Bologna specifically developed Iperbole for its citizens, the site undergoes continual development to facilitate new mechanisms for civic input, and it was the first project in Italy to focus on local e-democracy and the second of its kind in Europe, following Amsterdam’s Digital City (Nesti & Valentini, 2010). Because of its success and reputation throughout Europe, Bologna’s Iperbole is one of the most frequency referenced examples of a local initiative and has won multiple European awards (Aurigi, 2000; 2005b). Bologna’s drive to facilitate improved mechanisms for online civic participation in policy-making also positioned the local government to offer its expertise on other e-government initiatives. For example, Bologna coordinates the development of Web 2.0 applications in partnerships created with five other municipalities from the wider Emilia Romagna region. Bologna has also been involved with larger projects such as the European Union’s Delphi Mediation Online System, in which Bologna implemented the first online prototype for civic consultation (Di Maria & Rizzo, 2005). The developmental processes and experiences of the City of Bologna in offering online opportunities for civic engagement therefore offer an invaluable source of information for municipalities seeking to advance their online practices to facilitate two-way civic participation.

While other local e-government initiatives that are progressive and socially inclusive were considered for comparison with this empirical study of the City of Casey, Bologna was selected as its online practices are managed by the local government itself, with no private influences such as occurs in cities like Amsterdam and Bristol. Both Casey and Bologna are well-positioned financially to trial and implement e-government initiatives, an advantage not held by all authorities. Bologna is an economically affluent area; the government won the funds to set up Iperbole and has subsequently gained outside grants to continually develop it (Tambini, 1997). The City of Casey’s 2009-2010 financial year budget was approximately AU$198 million, with an estimated expenditure on its e-government practices of AU$10,000 (Freeman, 2011). Casey is in a favourable position to develop its e-government as it has a staff member in its
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communications department who is dedicated to online communications, has undertaken university training in website development, and creates and updates the local government’s web content. Few Australian local governments have such a valuable resource and must outsource the development and maintenance of their e-government practices, increasing both the cost of e-government and the time required to update information. This means that Casey is in an optimal position to further develop e-government engagement opportunities and, if it does so, may subsequently provide an exemplar to other Australian local governments seeking to improve their online practices to meet the Federal Government’s online engagement goal.

Casey’s current website was predominantly the result of an increased need for the government to manage communications in the digital age and aid citizen access to information. Bologna’s emphasis on public participation, administrative transparency and the enhancement of local democracy offers a suitable contrast in terms of ICT-enabled civic participation. In Bologna, a universal right to connectivity was viewed as a political right of citizenship and recognised as a necessary precondition for civic inclusion and participation in e-democracy (Tambini, 1997). The local government subsequently initially prioritised the provision of ICT infrastructure for civic access, which offers a useful parallel to the infrastructure currently being installed throughout Australia. However, Bologna offered free Internet access to its citizens to help ensure social inclusion and prevent the emergence of an uninformed underclass (Tambini, 1997). Australian citizens will continue to be required to pay for Internet access, and the cost is likely to partially inhibit online participation. Casey does, however, provide free public access terminals in local libraries and community centres for citizen use, as Bologna has done. While governance processes in Italy and Australia vary, much can be learned from a comparison of different contexts rather than by examining similar case studies. This comparison helps in identifying recommendations for the development and implementation of participatory e-government both in Casey and for local governments at a similar stage of development.

Evidence of the City of Bologna’s e-government development has been taken from secondary sources. The use of secondary sources was necessary due to language barriers that inhibited direct examination of the government’s online practices. While several sources have been used to highlight Bologna’s e-government development, the work of Guidi (2009) and Aurigi (2000; 2005a; 2005b; 2006) particularly inform this chapter. The reasoning for this is that Guidi offers invaluable insight from the perspective of an official from the municipality itself, providing evidence of the local government’s online practices and future aims for increasing citizen participation through additional ICT innovation. Aurigi’s work provides an extensive in-depth empirical investigation (spanning eight years) of Iperbole, which began during Iperbole’s early stages of development and includes website analysis and interviews with local politicians and officials. The evidence drawn from Aurigi’s investigation therefore parallels both Casey’s current e-government practices and this chapter’s evaluation of Casey’s development through in-depth interviews with local councillors. As such, evidence from Bologna provides vital insight into the ways that Casey may progress its online practices to facilitate increased civic participation and engagement.

LOCAL E-GOVERNMENT AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The City of Casey

The Australian municipality of the City of Casey is located to the south-east of metropolitan Melbourne. It was proclaimed in 1994 after forced amalgamations and the restructuring of local governments throughout the State of Victoria.
Casey covers 400 square kilometres and is home to approximately 256,000 citizens, making it the seventh largest Australian local government in terms of population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). The council faces some limitations in terms of infrastructure access in rural areas and in suburbs that have undergone rapid development where existing infrastructure is insufficient to keep up with demand. Many of these problems will, however, be addressed under the Australian Federal Government’s plan to implement improved broadband infrastructure to all Australian premises (see www.nbn.gov.au).

The council’s website is its primary form of e-government (www.casey.vic.gov.au). The site is continually updated and successfully increases information dissemination, offering transparency of government documents. It contains an immense array of information on the local area, services, events, the council itself, and contains copies of policies, strategies and budgets. The site facilitates minimal two-way transactions, for example, to pay infringement notices and rates. As previously suggested, this type of website that privileges one-way service delivery over opportunities for two-way exchange is common amongst Australian local governments (see O’Toole, 2009). Casey also uses social media including Facebook and Twitter to further spread messages to the public. However, the two-way nature of these platforms is largely overlooked. Instead, they are predominantly used to post the headlines of media releases with links to the full reports on the council’s website. This observation confirms Jimenez et al.’s (2012) finding that social media are largely underused by local governments, with their use employed primarily for increased access to information.

A civic networking site has been developed by the City of Casey (www.caseyconnect.net.au), which enables local clubs, groups and association to produce a webpage free of charge to help recruit new members. Interaction through this site is limited to downloadable forms and hyperlinks to external websites and email addresses. The site does not facilitate citizen communication with the local government itself. In November 2010, the council launched another website called Casey Conversations (caseyconversations.com.au), which provides discussion boards on key advocacy issues. Casey Conversations is a promising development that suggests the government has recognised the need to offer more participatory practices for citizens. However, the discussion topics available primarily concern issues where the final responsibility rests with state or federal authorities, rather than locally-decided issues. There is also no indication that local representatives visit the website or read citizens’ comments, meaning citizen contributions through this site may have little impact.

An example of an advocacy campaign run through Casey Conversations is a discussion forum regarding the capacity of the water authority’s drainage system. This forum was launched in mid-June 2011 after heavy rains brought flash flooding to Casey communities, resulting in emergency evacuations and many losses of homes and businesses. The forum contains 29 posts (until June 2012), which highlight how local residents were affected by the floods and suggest potential action to prevent future flooding. Citizens also posted information about community-run groups that were set up to offer support to those affected, and the forum has been viewed over 1,200 times. The council was slow to respond to comments, with four responses in total over a 12-month period, and the only posts to citizens by a Casey administrator were generic ‘thank you for your feedback’ replies. Citizens began to question use of the website to communicate with the local government. For example, on 19 July 2011, part of one citizen’s post was: “I believe this site is more of a front to stop us calling and bothering the Casey, Seriously will we get any feed back from this?” (Peterk, errors in original). This comment received a generic thank you response from the Casey administrator. This advocacy campaign did not influence the operation of either the water
authority in improving the drainage systems and retarding basins or the local government, which could have addressed many of the citizens’ suggestions such as building additional footbridges and clearing drains along roadways. In June 2012, large parts of the municipality again flooded, this time it was the worst flooding that many areas had seen in half a century. Emergency evacuations again occurred and further homes and businesses (as well as many that had previously been affected) received substantial damage. Many citizens did, however, receive a general letter of apology from Melbourne Water for having their properties inundated with water.

Casey’s e-government therefore currently remains predominantly restricted to service delivery and tokenistic forms of participation, rather than spaces for discourse and deliberation (see Freeman & Hutchins, 2009). Casey, like many local governments, is grappling in the midst of a realisation of the need to incorporate more participatory elements into its online operations to suit the changing communications environment and the new forms of sharing, collaboration and exchange inscribed through the interactive nature of ICTs. This realisation has not yet led to the effective implementation of online mechanisms that facilitate, stimulate and support active online civic participation where citizen involvement informs decision-making processes.

The hesitation to create more online participatory practices that can influence local decisions appears to be resulting from existing political problems behind the technology. Jensen’s (2009) investigation into citizens’ online interactions with local governments and the impact on policymaking highlights that government ICT use is politically shaped. While Casey is a relatively newly established council, it has received a substantial amount of negative news media coverage, making both state and national headlines, and has been labelled the State’s “most dysfunctional council” (Rolfe, 2012, p. 18). The actions of Casey councillors have been the subject of several Ombudsman investigations and on multiple occasions the police have been called into council meetings to expel unruly councillors. Corruption, misconduct, leaking of information, death threats, threats of poisoning pets, sexual harassment law suits, and accusations of intimidation and bullying are nothing new for this local government. Each interviewee spoke of other councillors’ transgressions, particularly regarding misconduct during meetings, leaking of information and attempted manipulation of the election process. The political culture of Casey council has resulted in the formation of strategic alliances, which heavily influence the outcomes of local decisions. Opening additional channels for communication with citizens in such a culture is likely to present unnecessary risks for representatives to demonstrate greater accountability for their actions.

Shin’s (2012) study of the determinants behind e-government reveals that individual understandings and attitudes towards both technology and public service work shape e-government at the local level. There were substantial variations between interviewees in relation to ICT-knowledge and the value placed on citizen participation. The interviews revealed that the limited nature of Casey’s e-government practices is the result of two key factors: the influence of political actors unwilling to trial new methods of communicating with citizens, and insufficient and ineffective policy frameworks guiding the council’s online content and applications.

The interviewees’ comments surrounding the value of civic views in decision-making reflected the council’s reluctance to employ participatory e-government practices. The interviewees indicated that the only form of citizen participation that may influence councillors’ decisions is direct contact with representatives (through face-to-face, letters, telephone or email), given enough people contacted their representatives with the same concern. However, it is unlikely that citizen participation actually shapes decision-making. In reference to a local road development issue, citizens created an
action group, an online petition, wrote numerous letters-to-the-editor in local newspapers, and had direct contact with representatives at purposely held public meetings. When asked about citizens’ comments surrounding this issue, Councillor Red stated that they had no influence on the council’s decision. Councillor Black confirmed that, even though it was “terribly controversial... [the decision] never really got down to the citizens’ influence.” These comments suggest that neither online or offline methods for civic participation in Casey are currently considered in the council’s decision-making processes. Another interviewee indicated that citizen participation is often uninformed and too emotional to be considered in decision-making, and is unnecessary when representatives have been elected to make decisions for their citizens:

Eleven people have been elected to make the decision. If you put it back to the web and everyone may put their hand up and make the decision, then why have eleven councillors? And the other thing also is the people who are going to respond to this question, how well informed are they? That would be the real issue... Unfortunately, I think most times people make an emotional decision about things without having the facts in front of them. (Councillor White)

In contrast to this councillor’s comment, Pratchett (1999) highlights that it is part of the role of local government to keep citizens informed on issues to build democratic consciousness. Additionally, Pantti and van Zoonen (2006) suggest that emotion is needed in order to encourage participation in political activities. The flooding issue outlined earlier provides evidence of an emotional issue for citizens. Common suggestions for action on the Casey Conversations forum include sealing dirt roads, building footbridges, developing additional retarding basins, ensuring drains are cleared of rubbish, and using mobile-based emergency notifications. These are hardly irrational comments by local citizens.

If councillors are disinclined to use citizen participation to inform their decision-making, then it is of little surprise that the government’s online practices do not facilitate increased engagement. Councillors’ understandings and decisions regarding citizen involvement shape the ICT-enabled practices implemented. This point was evident in the interviewees’ comments regarding a motion to webcast council meetings. In this instance, councillors who were opposed questioned whether anyone would watch webcasts, viewed it as a waste of money (it was estimated to cost Casey less than 0.01 percent of its yearly budget; Freeman, 2011), and were concerned about potential legal issues that could arise from having full deliberations webcast to the public. Jimenez et al. (2012) highlight that the participatory features of local e-government are largely underdeveloped as the result of political and legal issues. Officially, the motion to webcast Casey council meetings failed due to unnecessary cost and potential legal concerns. However, Councillor Red stated that, “The true underlying meaning is that several councillors wouldn’t want to have been put under the pump of having their actions broadcast... I think for certain councillors, fear of being recorded would’ve been too much.” In this instance, the increased mediated visibility (Thompson, 2005) associated with webcasting was seen as a potential threat to councillors’ political viability. The strategic alliances on the council also shaped the outcome of the webcasting motion. Councillor Blue indicated that the decision not to webcast meetings was the result of the “climate of division” on the council and suggested that, “After the election we might be able to do it [webcast], if we get a few more councillors in that are a bit more amenable to those sort of things.” This webcasting example affirms Norris’ (2010) argument that technology application is dependent on the people and institutions that develop and implement its use.

In addition to shaping policy decisions, council divisions influence the effectiveness of current policies: “If you’ve got the numbers on the council,
you can totally disregard that policy” (Councillor Red). This comment suggests that Casey’s current policy frameworks may be ineffective if they are not in line with the views of the stronger alliance, which potentially impacts on all areas of Casey’s development. Equally alarming is the fact that the council does not have an e-government or Internet policy guiding its online content and applications; no councillor interviewed was aware of this fact. Inadequate policy guidance means that Casey’s e-government development is undertaken in an ad hoc manner. These findings are a concern for potential future engagement mechanisms, particularly as the decisions made according to alliances may not always be fully informed.

Casey’s communications department was asked to produce a report outlining the potential use of social media for more two-way communication with citizens. The report outlined the costs, risks and threats of implementing more participatory online practices, but failed to provide any suggestions of possible benefits. Based on its recommendations, the council voted against using the interactive applications of social media platforms, instead deciding to restrict online communication to one-way forms that it can control: “The key concern for Council when using social networking sites is the ability to control information that is placed on these sites” (City of Casey, 2009, p. 64, emphasis added). When the interests of the council are prioritised over advanced forms of communication with citizens, there is little hope that the City of Casey will facilitate greater online engagement. The following section details the Italian City of Bologna’s approach to e-government and citizen participation.

The City of Bologna

The Italian City of Bologna governs approximately 380,000 citizens within 140 square kilometres. In contrast to Casey, the local government has long been established, having existed for well over a century. It was not, however, until 1995 that the council and mayor began to be elected by popular vote. This date coincided with the development of the council’s Iperbole Internet project, an initiative that emphasises the importance of public involvement in government decisions (see www.comune.bologna.it). Iperbole itself was specifically designed to promote e-democracy through public participation in decision-making and engagement with government.

Iperbole is a free wireless civic network and community portal set up by the local government, which is designed to promote social cohesion and local development by enhancing public participation in decision-making. The initiative aims to provide equal opportunities to access the Internet, and enable direct relationships between citizens and the local area’s administration (Aurigi, 2005b). The City of Bologna recognised that the “involvement of citizens in the decision-making process and in designing (and monitoring) service activities is increasingly mandatory if the quality of public policy is to be enhanced” (Guidi, 2009, p. 262). Bologna has several broad aims for Iperbole:

- Allow more direct citizen participation in consultation and decision-making processes;
- Renew citizens’ interest in areas of dwindling political participation;
- Build a more solid consensus around the choices planned;
- Foster an ongoing dialogue to ensure balanced power and voices;
- Promote transparency in the public administration;
- Provide more direct and equal access to information, knowledge and services;
- Reduce discretionary administrative practices;
- Reduce the various ‘divides’ and gaps in order to empower citizens’ status and competences;
- Improve the quality of life and the economy; and
Communication is encouraged both between citizens and with the government, and Iperbole is supported by a set of policies that aim to increase usage of the site through inclusiveness and participation. These include policies addressing connectivity, public access, and citizens’ socio-economic differences (see Aurigi, 2000). The initiative aims to provide all of Bologna’s residents with access to the Internet in order to empower citizens (Tambini, 1997). The Iperbole website provides newsgroups and discussion forums for civic consultation. Drafts of government proposals are placed on the site so that citizens have a chance to contribute their views and inform public decision-making (Biasiotti & Nannucci, 2004). Citizens of Bologna are therefore provided with the opportunity to participate in online deliberation, contributing to the council’s decision-making processes and leading to engagement with government.

Bologna faced many challenges during the early stages of Iperbole’s development. The initial success of Iperbole was limited, with issues of civic access to the Internet and computer literacy found to be contributing factors to Iperbole’s slow uptake and use for political participation (see Tambini, 1997). The council attempted to counter these problems by providing free Internet connections and a small number of public access terminals where assistance with Internet use could be attained. A dramatic increase in users indicated that this was a successful policy measure. However, online public discourse on policy matters remained limited. Aurigi (2005b) highlights that Bologna needed to combine public participation policies with wider strategies for urban and community development to ensure successful online public debate. This approach would have capitalised on citizens’ increased interest in local issues (see Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2009). Instead, the council’s emphasis on public discourse weakened. Focus was placed on online services, with online participation mechanisms still present, but in the background (Aurigi, 2005b).

The online civic participation that did take place in Iperbole’s early years was often not taken into consideration in the council’s decision-making processes: “due to the poor contents of the discussion groups, these were rarely taken into account or used to improve the way the Council worked” (Aurigi, 2005b, p. 124). Online discussions often focused on leisure and entertainment, with debates on local politics and municipal issues few and far between (Aurigi, 2005b). Aurigi undertook an empirical investigation into Bologna’s Iperbole project between 1997 and 2004, which included interviewing local politicians and government officials. His work suggests that, during the early stages of Iperbole’s development, local politicians did not use online public participation to inform their decisions or actions. A local politician stated that, “I believe that for the moment there is no influence whatsoever from Iperbole on decision-making processes” (Interviewee quoted in Aurigi, 2000, p. 40). Another one of the local policy-makers indicated that, “If I told you that we have learnt something from there [Iperbole] that would allow us to change municipal organisation for the better, I would be just silly” (Interviewee quoted in Aurigi, 2000, p. 40). Additionally, online discussions were not moderated so conversations often became chaotic and dominated by a few local interest groups and protestors (Millham & Eid, 2009).

In addition to limited civic access and poor public discourse, Bologna encountered other problems that could have easily deterred the council from continuing its online initiatives. For example, Bologna was sued by four local Internet service providers over loss of profits, due to the local government’s provision of free Internet access for citizens. Funding and ownership issues also resulted from the council winning the funds to develop Iperbole (Aurigi, 2005b). While these is-
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sues contributed to criticism of Iperbole, Bologna continued to develop its e-government practices.

Not dissuaded from the initial limited success of *Iperbole*, the City of Bologna continued to provide the contexts needed for online civic deliberation and involvement with government. Bologna also persistently updated *Iperbole* to accommodate changes in the networked communications environment. For example, *Iperbole* is accessible via a smart phone optimised web application, is on *Twitter* – ‘Twiperbole’ – and Bologna has launched an *Iperbole* 2.0 project. This project is an experimental platform that utilises the open source nature of Web 2.0 tools (such as wikis, blogs and user-generated content) to facilitate increased interactivity, social sharing and personalised customisation of online practices (see Guidi, 2009). As a result of Bologna’s continued drive for online innovation, *Iperbole* now receives 500,000 visits daily (Guidi, 2009), which is a notable feat for any local government.

Online discourse has also significantly grown through *Iperbole* and its associated initiatives. For example, Bologna recently sought civic input into the development of its digital agenda. More than 70 applications were lodged online and there have been over 700 tweets with the agenda’s hashtag. In the long-term, therefore, *Iperbole* has been a successful initiative in fostering and supporting online citizen participation. Other Italian municipalities including Rome, Venice, and Milan have since followed Bologna’s lead (Biasiotti & Nannucci, 2004).

The success of Bologna’s *Iperbole* project is arguably the result of the broader attitudes towards online engagement held by the local government, which shaped both *Iperbole*’s development and the use of citizen participation in decision-making. While, initially, local politicians suggested that poor online public discourse was not used to inform decision-making, the local government’s continual drive for innovation has created thriving discourse and debate on local issues that is both rational and structured (Nesti & Valentini, 2010). A gradual process was, however, required to facilitate such effective online opportunities and public dialogue. Aurigi’s study highlights that the desire to provide improved opportunities for citizen participation was a key driver behind the development of Bologna’s e-government practices. An interview with a local government official illustrates the importance placed on citizen participation: The “citizen is much more than customer or client, because people must not be restricted to consuming services, but they should intervene in the decision making processes” (Interviewee quoted in Aurigi, 2006, p. 20). The promotion of e-democracy was viewed as necessary to help develop the capacity of the government to listen to the community (Di Maria & Rizzo, 2005). Bologna’s approach was therefore shaped by its primary emphasis on open government that sought to increase participation and consensus building (Aurigi, 2005a; Di Maria & Rizzo, 2005), rather than improve service delivery per se.

**Facilitating Civic Engagement**

E-government initiatives should not solely address citizens as customers needing improved service delivery methods, but as key participants in the policy processes that shape civil society. The effectiveness of future e-government initiatives will depend upon each government’s willingness and capacity to recognise the needs of its citizens and implement networking tools that permit civic participation. While the types of representative democracy present in Australia and Italy are different, Casey and Bologna provide useful case studies of the autonomous development of local e-government. At this stage, the City of Casey has prioritised the development of one-way information dissemination and service delivery practices. In contrast, Bologna has used ICTs to actively seek out two-way citizen participation and engagement, recognising that community involvement in decision-making enhances public policy (Guidi, 2009). While both councils capitalise on...
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the interactive capabilities of ICTs to enhance their operations, Casey is yet to recognise the value of including civic views in decision-making and has not taken full advantage of e-government tools to facilitate citizen participation and engagement. The different approaches to e-government development undertaken by Casey and Bologna have had noticeable effects on the participatory nature of their e-government practices.

Bologna’s initial e-government development largely focused on improving access to infrastructure, with citizen use also facilitated through public terminals. Ensuring equal access to sufficient ICT infrastructure is an important policy measure. This is a common and necessary course for many local governments, particularly during early stages of development (Cohen et al., 2005). Other local governments throughout the world have also addressed the need to offer improved access to ICT infrastructure for the advancement of social, cultural, and economic endeavours as well as political activities. Often these developments take place in municipal areas that cover large cities. For example, municipal broadband networks have been developed in over 300 cities in the United States of America, including San Francisco, Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles and Houston (Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008).

Not all local governments are in a position to advance infrastructure as Bologna and other select councils have done. In Australia, for example, the dispersed geographical nature of many local governments requires substantial resources to implement improved infrastructure, which creates a difficult task for rural and remote local governments with limited finances and small populations to govern. Many Australian infrastructure developments also lie outside the control of local authorities, with state and federal bodies responsible for developments. On this note, the Federal Government’s planned broadband infrastructure developments will provide a useful resource throughout the country. It is, however, up to the discretion of local governments to offer public access terminals and educational programs to enhance civic adoption and use of ICTs. The City of Casey provides complimentary public Internet access terminals in local libraries and community centres, and the libraries run free Internet education classes on an ad hoc basis. The cost of providing these terminals and training programs may not be feasible for some local governments, and there may be a failure amongst local governments in recognising the various needs of users (Cohen et al., 2005). In Casey, there was evidence that some councillors had limited understandings of new technologies. For example, when asked about the availability of broadband Internet, Councillor White responded:

*I think broadband is available, but everyone keeps talking about broadband and whatever the other one is called, dial up... Depending on what you do, and what your needs are, I don’t know whether broadband is a must have. So if you’ve got one or the other, I don’t really think it matters if you’ve got the time to use it.* (Councillor White)

This comment reaffirms Tate, Hynson, and Toolland’s (2007) argument that many local authorities are experiencing a disconnection between expectations for ICT use and the necessary knowledge and capabilities to meet these expectations.

Damodaran, Nicholls, Henny, Land, and Ferby (2005) highlight that, in addition to a gap in knowledge and skills in local councils, e-government principles are not embedded in local government processes, resulting in little emphasis on e-participation. A cohesive approach that combines federal resources and local practices may be needed to facilitate online citizen participation and engagement through e-government in certain countries (see Flowers, Tang, Molas-Gallart, & Davies, 2006). Jaeger and Thompson (2003) highlight that in order “to achieve effective e-governance, the different levels of government in a nation must work in cooperation to develop and implement an e-government strategy” (2003, p. 391). Federal resources and guidance can aid
infrastructure developments and enhance digital literacy amongst local government officials. Conversely, local governments possess the necessary knowledge about particular areas, citizen groups and local issues needed to ensure infrastructure developments and online spaces for engagement are the most effective for citizens and locales. Bologna illustrates that local governments are often well positioned to recognise citizens’ needs and address socio-economic and skill divisions to ensure civic access to and use of the Internet. Additionally, Bologna highlights that, given sufficient resources, local governments are capable of implementing effective online spaces for citizen participation. Local policies may therefore play a crucial role in the development of participatory e-government practices (Graham & Aurigi, 1997).

In their analysis of Dutch cities, Cohen et al. (2005) highlight the importance of using local policies that address infrastructure improvements, enhance civic adoption and use, and more broadly guide the provision of online spaces for citizen discourse and deliberation. To facilitate participation in decision-making and enhance civic connection and engagement through e-government, such a holistic approach to ICT policy is needed. E-government policy-makers therefore need to recognise the importance of utilising strong policy guidance to ensure democratic application of the technologies. Casey is yet to recognise the benefits of using ICT policies to guide the development and implementation of its online practices. Despite the initial focus on infrastructure and use, Bologna did not fall into the predicament of equating improved access with increased participation, and recognised that spaces for direct online involvement needed to be provided. Moreover, Bologna was prepared to allow online discourse to inform decision-making.

The right to participate in government processes lies at the heart of a democratic society. Citizens are not, however, required to participate in deliberative democratic practices (see Barber, 1984). Opportunities for participation should still be provided by governments. Participatory e-government practices need to evolve continually with changes in the communications environment to offer new opportunities for citizens and to bolster and support online engagement. Bologna recognised the importance of this, continually advancing and adapting its online initiatives to changing communicative practices, and providing citizens with developed contexts and ample opportunities for participation. Moreover, e-government was integrated into the councils’ everyday practices, with improved services and advanced participation complementing each other. Internet technologies have become a part of many citizens’ everyday experiences (Green, 2008). E-government, then, in principle should be routine, not separated from the normal duties of governments but incorporated and integrated into everyday operations. The City of Casey facilitates excellent transparency of information and continues to develop its online presence. It has taken innovative e-government steps in its establishment of a civic networking website and a website for citizen views on advocacy issues. However, these sites do not operate within a government Internet domain. The development, maintenance and moderation of Casey Conversations are also outsourced from the local government. These observations suggest that Casey is reluctant to integrate these e-government initiatives into their everyday practices, potentially mitigating the impact of online citizen participation.

Online engagement is a gradual process that takes effort on the part of both politicians and constituents. The impact of current methods for citizen participation on decision-making in the City of Casey is negligible, at best. Additional online opportunities may be futile until there is a change in the governmental culture of Casey council to allow citizens to inform local decisions. By following the example of Bologna, Casey may be able to open their representation by being receptive to civic views. At present, evidence from Casey suggests that broader attitudes towards civic
participation and the political will of representatives shape the inclusion of, and responsiveness to, civic views (see also Jensen, 2009; Gauld, Gray, & McComb, 2009). Local governments do not necessarily possess all the knowledge necessary to make every decision effectively for locales (Aurigi, 2005a). Citizen involvement adds an information source and enriches debate. In Casey, it is the politics behind the technology, rather than the online tools and participation methods offered, that limit the use of citizen participation in decision-making and hinder civic engagement with representatives. Institutional settings play a powerful role in developing online engagement through e-government (Chadwick, 2011). Civic engagement is a long-term exercise and should not be inhibited by short-term politics. Therefore, changing the culture of government is as important for the success of participatory e-government as the updating of practices to suit new technological developments.

**FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

This chapter highlights that current limitations to online engagement at the local level are often the result of institutional influences behind the application of the technologies. The use of technology in government operations is moulded by various factors (Millham & Eid, 2009). Some of the factors highlighted here include the impact of councillors’ understandings of the value of civic participation, limited digital literacy amongst representatives, insufficient and ineffective policy frameworks, and the impact of political machinations and short-term politicking. The success of future participation initiatives will depend upon recognising and addressing these types of limitations for each authority, citizenry and locale, as problems will vary across governments and areas. Moreover, the diverse nature of e-government – internal and external communications, alterations to service delivery, broader administrative reform, and changing notions of democracy and citizenship – means that measures for success will vary depending on the goal of each initiative. For this reason, it is important for governments to develop and utilise strong policy frameworks and learn from lessons of other government bodies to enhance the approaches undertaken. The experience of Bologna, for example, highlights the initial need for a well co-ordinated approach that combines online participation initiatives with community development issues in order for facilitate citizen discourse and deliberation (Aurigi, 2005b).

While this chapter has used the views of local government officials to examine citizen participation through e-government, there is also a need for greater research into citizens’ perspectives. There is little point in governments implementing new online opportunities for participation if the platforms developed do not appeal to citizens. Moreover, if the goal is to enhance citizen engagement, it is important to uncover the types of issues with which citizens want to be involved. Governments can speak to, for example, interest groups or citizen advisory committees to gain an understanding into the practices desired by citizens. This knowledge can be used to frame the development of e-government practices to suit citizens and increase the chance of successful engagement.

**CONCLUSION**

The varying approaches to e-government development and implementation undertaken by Casey and Bologna have had marked impacts on the success of their participatory projects. Bologna initially set out to encourage e-democracy whereas Casey followed the typical evolution of e-government by beginning with information dissemination and basic e-commerce functions (see Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2009). Both local governments developed their online practices autonomously from other levels of government, but Casey’s on-
line applications have been implemented in an ad hoc manner without the aid of any guiding policy documentation. Bologna, by comparison, had specific aims for Iperbole’s space for online dialogue and its incorporation into decision-making. In Casey, citizen involvement scarcely informs the views of policy-makers. Broader institutional contexts and political factors, such as affiliations and councillors’ divergent understandings of ICTs and the role of citizens in the democratic process, contribute to a reluctance to cede control of political messages in the online environment, which presently restricts the council’s development of participatory e-government practices.

These local government examples highlight the varying emphasis placed on service delivery and civic participation in e-government initiatives, and how institutional contexts directly shape opportunities for civic engagement. If Casey is to offer more participatory mechanisms as Bologna has done, the local government will need to make greater use of guiding policy documentation, further educate local representatives on the potential benefits of online civic involvement, and undergo a broader change in governmental culture so that representatives are receptive to citizen input. Such strategies are needed if Casey’s e-government is to progress to effectively facilitate civic participation and enable contributions to inform decision-making processes.

As communicative and democratic practices change, e-government holds a vital position for the future of citizen participation. Local governments offer a key context for the provision of online spaces that enable increased civic engagement and connection with representatives. The success of such spaces largely depends upon effective political frameworks being in place that allow citizen participation to influence government decision-making. If e-government is to facilitate online civic engagement, focus needs to be shifted away from the ‘e’ in e-government – away from the technologies and the increased efficiency they enable – and towards the government actions, policies and outcomes that support the ‘e’.

REFERENCES


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**ADDITIONAL READING**


KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Citizens: Individuals with the political right to reside in a region, vote and be represented by a government.

Councillors: Elected representatives of local governments.

E-Government: Use of information and communication technologies as the interface for government-citizen communications.

Engagement: The active involvement of citizens in political issues, with the ability to exert influence on government decision-making.

Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs): Information and communications technologies that combine computing with telecommunications, such as the Internet and World Wide Web.

Interaction: The exchange function of communication processes, mediated or non-mediated.

Local Government: An administrative level of government concerned with the civic affairs of a designated region.

Participation: Citizens’ political involvement with government.

ENDNOTES

1. Similarly, Bruns (2008) distinguishes between politics-as-product and politics-as-process. The former is concerned with winning votes and elections, and the latter emphasises ongoing participation, which enables public policy to be continually revised.

2. In accordance with university ethics requirements, councillors cannot be identified by name in this research. To distinguish between councillors, each has been assigned a colour: Councillors Black, Blue, Red, White and Yellow.

3. There has been a local government election since the interviews were conducted with Casey councillors, which has altered the representatives on council. However, the issues impacting on local e-government that are identified later in this chapter, such as ICT knowledge, ineffective policy documents, lack of responsiveness to citizens, and councillor corruption and misconduct, persist within the government.


5. Melbourne Water manages water drainage throughout the municipality jointly with the local government.

6. Interestingly, these alliances do not entirely align with political parties as may be expected. There has, however, been an instance where a mayor has changed political parties to maintain an alliance.