E-governance, e-democracy and rural citizens

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Abstract

As well as commercial and leisure uses, internet confers on its users the opportunity for civic engagement in a variety of ways, ranging from simple information acquisition from government departments, to interacting with a wide range of individuals and groups in the wider processes of governance. Rural citizens stand to gain more than most, relatively, since the use of the internet reduces, if not removes, former barriers (particularly that of distance) to such interaction. However, there is a danger that non-users of the internet are disenfranchised by such developments, and these include some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable sectors of rural populations. The paper suggests that this is an issue of fundamental importance, and that research is needed to find ways of bringing the benefits of e-governance to those sectors.

Keywords: internet, rural, governance, democracy, exclusion

1. E-governance and e-democracy

1.1 e-government

Most of the discussion about internet and its potential in rural areas has, understandably, focussed on commercial uses – e-commerce and e-business. It is these activities that have driven the development of the internet generally, and which have provided the incentive for provision of most online information. Governments have broader priorities, however, and those in Western Europe have been devoting a great deal of energy and resources to developing the public service element of the ‘Information Society’. Thus while the European Commission’s eEurope 2005 Action Plan, published in May 2002, included e-business as a major development goal, another central objective was that, by 2005, Europe should have modern online public services, including e-government (European Commission 2002). Since the publication of its ‘Knowledge Economy’ White Paper (Department of Trade and Industry 1998) the UK government has made online service a priority. In 2004, the UK’s Office of Deputy Prime Minister (OPDM) announced a programme to “assist local government to achieve 100% capability in electronic delivery of priority services by 2005, in ways that customers will use”, backed by a capital grant of £500,000 for each local authority (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (UK) 2004). The Foreword to the UK 2005 Digital Strategy, written by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Industry, proclaims that “We must harness the power of ICT to modernise public services so they are as personalised, efficient and responsive as the most successful companies” (Cabinet Office 2005p.3). Although New Labour Britain has focussed more than most countries on the internet as a tool of government, the pattern is repeated to varying degrees across Europe and much of the rest of the world.

Most definitions of e-government concentrate on the delivery of services by government to populations via electronic means, which can include telephone and fax, but generally imply use of the internet, via computer, phone, digital TV or other device. When looking at progress in that respect, the World Bank compares the evolution of e-government with that of e-commerce, and concludes that while the latter has progressed in stages from publishing through interactivity, and completing transactions, to delivery,
most e-government activity has centred on the first, publishing stage. The Bank identifies broad goals of e-government as:

- better service delivery to citizens
- improved services for business
- transparency & anticorruption
- empowerment through information
- efficient government purchasing (World Bank 2005).

With a more local focus (perhaps more apposite to a discussion in a rural context), the UK’s ODPM identifies key objectives to be served by e-government as:

- Raising standards across schools
- Improving the quality of life of vulnerable sectors [of the population]
- Promoting healthier communities
- Creating safer and stronger communities
- Transforming local environment
- Meeting local transport needs
- Promoting economic vitality. (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (UK) 2004)

For rural populations, the notion of e-government holds many attractions, helping to overcome the barriers of distance and avoiding the need to make physical visits to government and agency offices. Any online process, whether transactional or merely informational, which substitutes for one involving physical movement is likely to be of greater utility to rural than to urban populations, especially the increasing tendency of governments to regard such services as ‘bettersments’, and to reduce or fail to make provision in areas of dispersed population (Furuseth 1998 p236). Thus the online rural citizen, on discovering worrying and/or embarrassing bodily symptoms, can turn to the net for help deciding whether they might be suffering the effects of dissipation and increasing age rather than from a life-threatening illness. The same applies if they need to find carers for elderly relatives, check education facilities in a particular area, find a new job, check the local authority’s approach to recycling, or submit an agricultural subsidy claim form. All these things can be done without the internet, of course. But doing so would take far longer, require (in many instances) physical movement over quite large distances, cost more, and probably result in a lower quality of outcome in terms of variety of source and depth of coverage.

1.2 e-governance and e-democracy

The concept of e-government is limited, however, by its emphasis on formal processes and structures of government, and its tendency to be a ‘top-down’ operation: ‘we will decide what you need and how you should have it’. A broader, and potentially more exciting concept, is that of ‘e-governance’. ‘Governance’ is concerned with the distribution and exercise of power as a whole – not just that vested in the state. Thus it takes account of the interaction of a range of influential organisations and forces, including central and local government, but also non-government agencies, community groups, interest and pressure groups, charities, business groupings, direct activists, and so on. In the modern state, these can be very numerous, and the interlinking highly complex. Fig. 1 illustrates this, implying a diffusion of governance from the centralized model of the 20th century to a broader influence base during the 21st. The concept of ‘e-governance’ reflects the way in which the internet and associated technologies can be used to enhance interaction not only between the state and its population, but between all the various actors involved in the wider sphere of public decision-making. Further, the non-hierarchical nature of the internet can encourage use of non-hierarchical approaches to governance, such that a small but well-organised and technically competent group can create powerful influence by persuasion or even by intimidation of a large audience with little cost or effort. The latter can be regarded as one expression of ‘e-democracy’, which can range from the facility to express opinion (for instance by joining an internet community formed to put pressure on politicians to favour a particular aspect of rural policy, or by influencing the outcome of a local election by email canvassing) to more or less formal voting procedures which may be within or without the traditional processes of representative democracy.

It takes little imagination to realise that the development of e-governance and e-democracy could be one of the most potent contributions of ICT to the development of rural areas, and the empowering of rural populations – far beyond that implied by most official e-government initiatives. With this power
comes dangers, though. One of these is not unique to e-governance, but may be exacerbated by it, and that is the ‘democratic deficit’ which arises when decisions with impact on public policy are made by bodies which are not directly accountable to elected representatives. What may seem like a perfect expression of democracy to a small group (a village community, say) who take action to improve their own circumstances may appear rather less democratic to other groups who rely on the same pool of resources and hope for a rather more disinterested decision balancing the needs of all those affected.

2. Digitally excluded, socially excluded, politically excluded?

A more particular danger with online processes is the familiar one of ‘digital divides’ (Warren 2002). In the UK, a reasonably advanced country in ICT terms, only just over half of its households could access internet from home in October 2004; 34% of adults had never used the internet, and 19% declared that they were not likely to in the future (ONS 2004). In autumn 2003, 53% of people living in rural areas in England and Wales used the internet (at any location, including home, work, and public access facilities); 37% of rural households had a public internet access point (PIAP) within one kilometre, compared to 68% of urban households.

In tackling digital exclusion, the temptation is to focus on supply of the technology (and most governments have succumbed to the temptation), but this is only part of the issue. Of course physical access to the technology is important crucial. In many rural parts of the world, such problems can be very basic, relating to the quality and capacity of ageing copper-based telephone lines (Grubesic and Murray 2002), or local monopolies of telecommunication corporations over exchanges and ‘last mile’ infrastructure, with little incentive to open up to alternative providers. At a more advanced level, provision of broadband internet to rural areas is generally limited by the high investment and low potential returns (a notable exception being the UK, where despite originally stating that, British Telecom has committed to putting 99.6% of the population within reach of ADSL broadband (Richardson 2004)). But digital exclusion is also a factor of the demand for the technology, or rather for the services that it can provide, from society and its component individuals. This is a much more difficult matter to identify, partly because it is so entangled with other social issues, and thus less popular as a policy target. It is here that the links between digital exclusion and social exclusion begin to become apparent.

2.1 Social exclusion as a factor in digital exclusion

The term ‘social exclusion’ has a variety of roots and potential meanings, but is commonly used to denote a bundle of factors that combine to marginalise the individual from collective processes and benefits. Thus in a comprehensive discussion, Mingione refers to “a combination of economic hardship and institutional discrimination, both of which help to create unfavourable life chances and chronic exclusion from normal citizenship” (Mingione 1997 p12). The relevant factors can be classified under four headings:
• Income deprivation
• Social deprivation (including poor education or health)
• Disengagement and marginalisation (i.e. withdrawal and rejection)
• Lack of local services: public services, private services, infrastructure. (Talbot 2003)

With these factors in mind, it is possible to identify certain types of person who are likely to be particularly prone to social exclusion, for instance:
• The elderly, particularly those living alone, and/or living on a state pension;
• Those who are physically and/or mentally infirm;
• Those who are unemployed or in low-income employment (for instance seasonal agricultural or tourism employment);
• Those in low-earning self-employment (including those ‘under-employed’ or ‘disguised unemployed’ in family farm businesses);
• Those without the education and/or skills to develop their income-earning capacity or their connectedness with society;
• Single parents, especially female;
• Children in low-income households;
• Those who are physically distanced from other people and/or services by, for instance, lack of transport;
• Ethnic minorities;
• People prevented by other responsibilities from obtaining paid employment (such as within-family carers). (Social Exclusion Unit 2001; Commission for Rural Communities 2005b p12)

Over 35 years ago, Tichenor proposed a ‘knowledge gap’ hypothesis, suggesting that: “…as the infusion of mass media into a social system increases, segments of the population with higher socio-economic status tend to acquire this information at a faster rather than the lower status segments, so that the gap in knowledge between these segments tends to increase rather than decrease” (Tichenor, Donohue and Olien 1970). This is not unique to ICT innovation: in a general context, Rogers states that usually “new ideas make the rich richer and the poor poorer, widening the socio-economic gap between the earlier and later adopters…. The effects of an innovation usually cannot be managed to separate the desirable from the undesirable consequences” (Rogers 1995 p414). Given the importance of online processes in modern society, however, it has a particular resonance in the context of ICT. A picture begins to develop of a vicious cycle: Social exclusion leads to digital exclusion, which in turn perpetuates and exacerbates that social exclusion. This is supported by a wide range of authors (including Van Winden 2001 p867; Chen, Boase and Wellman 2002 pp80-81; Servon 2002 p2; Crampton 2003 p168). “The digital divide… will be mainly the concern of the poorest, most discriminated segment of the population – thus furthering their marginality” (Castells 2001 p254).

This, of course, can be applied to both town and country. But just as technology provision has distinct characteristics in rural areas, so does social exclusion. Rural deprivation tends to be influenced more by limited accessibility, high service costs and poor service provision (Furuseth 1998 p240). It tends to be more dispersed spatially than in urban areas, which makes it more difficult to identify and measure (and sometimes even to believe in1), and less susceptible to remedies which rely on peer-to-peer support within disadvantaged place-communities (Commission for Rural Communities 2005b pp5-6). The dispersal of the disadvantaged through rural society can also affect the focus of service provision: the more prosperous and engaged members of society, often ‘incomers’, can exert strong influence over local government processes, and steer them towards their own visions of community development in a way that would be more difficult in more concentrated and homogeneous populations.

3. Conclusions

E-governance offers the rural citizen significant benefits, helping to overcome the disadvantages of distance and social dispersion. The flip side of that coin is that the disbenefits to non-users are

1 Furuseth (1998):233, for instance, refers to ‘…the fixation of public and elected officials on poverty as an urban issue’. 
increasing, with the prospect of non-users of internet suffering first relative disadvantage (not being able to participate in new, additional services open to users) and then absolute disadvantage as facilities and services which were previously available by conventional means are withdrawn in favour of online provision. This brief paper argues that, while improving infrastructure and physical access is a priority, this will not on its own overcome rural exclusion from digital processes such as e-governance and e-democracy. Nor will training schemes designed to improve the competence and confidence of potential internet users, crucial though they are. There is a significant proportion of the population who will be unable, in the medium term at least (and some of them never) to interact directly with the internet – for instance those who have:

- Insufficient means to acquire computer hardware and to pay access fees;
- Lack of ‘engagement’ – pathological lack of ability, confidence, understanding and/or motivation (and limited opportunity for remedying);
- No chance of access to a PIAP, due to distance combined with lack of transport; or lack of physical mobility;
- Inability to make direct use of computer equipment due to debilitating physical (including visual) or mental infirmity;
- Inability to interact with information due to illiteracy².

The development of new interfaces (e.g. alternatives to the conventional keyboard and mouse, or displays which compensate for visual impairment) offers hope to some people with physical infirmity or who are intimidated by the computer; the spread of digital television, with facilities for interaction with the internet, may help those for whom television is a necessity, but a computer an expense too far; increasing the number of subsidised PIAPs will overcome transport problems for some. Quite apart from the time needed to develop them fully, however, such initiatives address only a part of the problem. We should accept that for the foreseeable future, there will be a significant part of the population that will not use the internet. Alongside our research into advanced technological developments, we need to be looking for radical and cheap approaches which enable people to reap some at least of the benefits of the internet without necessarily having direct access. In doing so, we may well find clues in work in Third World countries, such as studies of information flows and of ‘information intermediaries’ (OFarrell 2001), providing an interpretative and synthesizing function between information sources and disadvantaged groups. The alternative – the shrug of the shoulders – implies accepting that some of the most vulnerable members of rural society will be excluded from the most potent opportunities to play their full part as citizens, and to reap the benefits which are their right.

4. References


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² There are only half a million people who have such poor vision that they are qualified to register as ‘blind’ but there are two million more people who cannot read Times New Roman, often the default on a computer screen” (Carey 2000)

³ In 2000, nearly 40% of adults in some parts of the UK could not read or write properly or do simple sums. 24% of UK adults were estimated as being functionally illiterate, the latter being defined as: "whether a person is able to understand and employ printed information in daily life, at home, at work and in the community!” (National Literacy Trust 2005). The pattern is similar in other Western countries, including the US and Canada.


