WHAT IS E-DEMOCRACY? AN INTRODUCTION

Lucas Walsh

Post-doctoral Fellow in Democracy and New Media, School of Communications and Multimedia, Edith Cowan University

Abstract

In this paper the author provides a definition and some examples of e-democracy in the Australian context, with emphasis on the use of the Internet to increase citizen participation. A basic model of four types of activity in the area of e-democracy is presented: (i) e-government services and administration; (ii) participatory technologies; (iii) informal modes of participation using the Internet; and (iv) mass news media. The discussion also explores some of the political dilemmas encountered when seeking to use new media to enhance and extend democracy.

Introduction

This paper seeks to provide a brief overview of the current development of electronic democracy, or “e-democracy”, in Australia. I will provide some recent examples of e-democracy, with emphasis on the use of the Internet to extend and enhance citizen participation. Activity in the area of e-democracy is categorised into four overlapping groups: (i) e-government services and administration; (ii) participatory technologies; (iii) informal modes of participation using the Internet; and (iv) mass news media. Discussion will pay particular attention to the first two areas of activity, e-government and participatory technologies.

This paper concludes with a brief reflection on some important challenges to e-democracy in Australia. I wish to highlight the importance of constructing a shared vision of what democracy means before considering how information and communications technology (ICT) is best put to use.

E-democracy: a definition

The term electronic democracy, or “e-democracy”, is comparable to virtual democracy, teledemocracy, digital democracy and cyber democracy. Following Kenneth L. Hacker and Jan van Dijk’s discussion of “digital democracy”, e-democracy “is the use of… ICT… and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in all kinds of media (e.g. the Internet, interactive broadcasting and digital telephony) for purposes of enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication” (Hacker and van Dijk 2000, p.1). For the purposes of this paper e-democracy is defined by the use of electronic information and communications technologies (ICTs) to extend or enhance access to information and facilitate participation in democratic communities, processes and institutions. Historically, this has included the use of radio, telephone and televisual media, although during the last ten years interest in e-democracy has shifted to focus on the use of the Internet and, more recently, interactive television. The use of the Internet can be broadly grouped into four overlapping areas of e-democratic activity: (i) government services and administration; (ii) participatory technologies, such as online policy consultation; (iii) informal modes of participation, such as blogging and Hacktivism; and (iv) mass news media.
(i) Government services and administration

Electronic government, or “e-government”, is the most visible dimension of e-democracy at present as governments throughout the world place increasing amounts of information and services online. Defined by one United Nations (UN) report as “utilizing the internet and the world-wide-web for delivering government information and services to citizens”, e-government includes levels of application ranging from: any official government online presence; to enhanced services in which users can obtain services and other transactions online; to the “seamless” or full integration of e-services across administrative boundaries (UNDPE and PAASPA 2002).

The development of e-government in Australia is consistent with international experience, in which it is now “commonplace and expected that all organisations – public, private, or nonprofit – will have… a website” (Abramson and Morin 2003, p. 4). It has been estimated that between 1996 and 2001 the number of official government homepages throughout the world grew from less than 50 to over 50,000 (ASPA & UNDPEPA 2001, p. 5). With the advent of ‘clicks and mortar’, “the key question today is not whether organisations, including those in the public sector, have websites, but what is the quality of those sites and the scope of services being provided online” (Abramson and Morin 2003, p. 4). The importance of developing web-based technologies for e-governance has been recognised by virtually all States and Territories in Australia (Trinitas 2002, pp. 57-58). Initiatives, such as the Queensland Government’s e-Democracy Policy Framework and the Victorian Parliamentary Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee’s “Inquiry into Electronic Democracy”, reflect the growing significance of e-governance in enhancing and extending government information networks and administration of services. Email and databases are now used to coordinate organizational activity, daily government and parliamentary work (Grönlund 2002, Gibson, Ward, Rommele 2004). The Parliamentary Library in Canberra, for example, applies electronic technologies to information management in sophisticated and innovative ways (Magarey 2000). A United Nations e-government index, which used a mean figure derived from the web presence, telecommunications infrastructure and human capital measures, ranked Australia second to the US in the provision of e-government services (UN 2002).¹

Through e-government initiatives, Australian citizens have greater access to information and services, ranging from information about taxation, to electoral rules, to the activities of democratic representatives via the Internet. Federal Parliament has webcast² its parliamentary sessions and committee hearings for over four years. By 2003, Federal parliament and certain Committee activities were webcast via seven simultaneous channels and attracted about 15,000 hits per week during parliamentary sessions (SARC 2002c, Adams 2003).³ At the State level, Queensland Parliament has offered limited audio webcast services. It is at the local government at which webcasting perhaps offers the most benefit. Some municipal governments in Victoria and New South Wales stream council meetings to provide greater opportunity for community involvement in local government by enabling open access from home, as

¹ The reliability of this kind of index is debatable because of the type and weighting of indices used. Other reports, using different criteria and definitions of e-government, have produced a different global ranking. See, for example, Saywell 2001.

² Also referred to as "netcasting" (SARC 2002a, 2002c).

³ Viewers mainly consisted of lobbyists, the media and bureaucrats (Adams 2003).
well as promote a sense of transparency to council meetings. Citizens can watch issues of direct interest to them, such as council discussions about pollution levels in their municipality, or for general educative purposes. Webcasts also serve as an important document of democratic activity that can be accessed at a later date from anywhere in the world. The web as a medium is not bound by the time constraints which limit television and radio broadcasting; watching an unedited webcast has the advantage over reading a transcript of enabling the viewer to experience the tone and bearing of Members of Parliament (MPs) “live”.

Some webcasts offer viewers the opportunity to interact directly with representatives. Webcast facilities for council meetings at the Wellington Shire of Victoria, for example, include a chat function through which interested people can pose questions at the end of each meeting (Adams 2003). The capacity of electronic media, such as the Web, to enable greater opportunities for interaction with government and broader political participation is a second, albeit underutilised, dimension of e-democracy in Australia.

(ii) Use of the Internet to extend participation and citizenship

This second category of e-democracy includes the range of electronically mediated activities in which individuals, groups and organisations are able to form ally interact in determining the conditions of their political association. Opportunities to vote electronically (e-voting), engage policy development and debate online are examples of this; but note that I use the adverb “formally” to distinguish legitimate modes of participation from informal activities, such as Hacktivism, which are described in further detail as a third category of e-democratic activity below.

The use of the Internet to formally extend the scope and capacity for participation is distinguished from the provision of government information and services by adding the element of interactive communication. Van Dijk provides four categories of interactive communication: allocution (e.g. computerised election campaigns, civil service and information centres); consultation (e.g. web-based public information); registration (e.g. telepolling or televoting, electronic referenda and elections) and conversation (e.g. email, bulletin boards, electronic town halls and discussions) (van Dijk, in Hacker and van Dijk 2000, p. 40). As Davis and Owen (1998) have pointed out in the American context, the technology makes it easier for people to gather documents about government and politics and become involved in political discussion groups and collaborate to organise certain political activities. In Australia, the benefits of electronic technology have been recognised as enabling individuals to engage policy development through improved access to relevant information, more effective methods for the distribution of materials and proposals, and tools for greater collaboration, consensus formation and deliberation free from the constraints of time and space (SARC 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e). The New South Wales government, for example, sponsors the “Community Builders” network of policy implementation, in which an interactive electronic clearing house is used for community level social, economic and environmental renewal (www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au). The Queensland Government has established an e-Democracy Unit responsible for implementing and managing the Government's

4 The City of Botany Bay in Sydney has attracted at least one viewer from Canada, who turned out to be a relative of the minister presiding over the prayer at the start of each council meeting! (Adams 2003).
three e-democracy initiatives to test how information technology can enhance the community's access to government and participation in government decision-making through online community consultation, broadcast of parliament and e-petitions. The Citizenscape website of Western Australia promotes active participation in involvement in decision-making and informs about citizenship related activities (www.citizenscape.wa.gov.au). Magarey illustrates how electronic networking assisted in a process of community participation in the Federal Parliamentary debate on Native Title, observing that: “One of the benefits a parliamentary democracy may offer is the possibility that its processes of deliberation may build community and engender civic involvement… Internet technology arguably contributed to a fulfilment of these broader aspirations for Australian democracy” (Magarey 2000, pp. 62-64). These activities have experienced varying levels of success in both disseminating resources from government to citizens as well as engaging greater citizen involvement in representative government (Trinitas 2002, pp. 57-63).

Political parties are using the Internet to connect with their members, other groups, individuals and even other parties (Ackland and Gibson 2004; Chen 2004). But while political parties appear to be using the Internet to some advantage to build “quite varied and large web networks around themselves”, they “do more to reach the outside world than it does to reach them” (Ackland and Gibson 2004, pp. 29-30).

Historically, however, politicians have been reluctant to use ICT to seek greater input into policy development, although data on current trends is difficult to obtain. In her investigation of the Internet and Australian Parliamentary democracy, Magarey found that many Parliamentarians did not tend to use the technology to seek public input in the process of policy formation and exhibited a strong awareness of the limited nature of the audience of new media. Only a few parliamentarians had their own web pages and negatively associated new media with increased workload. Email was not regarded as an ‘official’ medium in the way that hard-copy was; nevertheless, it was perceived as allowing different voices to be heard (Magarey 2000, p. 58).

E-voting is another area in which Australia has yet to develop in a substantial way. Acknowledging that Australia lags behind international experience, a report co-authored by the Victorian and Australian Electoral Commissions two years ago recommended that Australia is ready to trial e-voting (Barry et al. 2002, p. 20). Electronic voting is defined as “Any system where the elector casts their vote using an online system, such as the Internet, touch-tone phone voting using interactive voice recognition, mobile telephone SMS text facility, or interactive digital television. Once recorded, the elector’s vote is despatched in real time to a secure electronic vote store, where it is held prior to counting” (Barry et al. 2002, p. 3). The use of e-voting outside of Australia has grown tremendously in terms of scale, such as the 2004 general elections in India, and complexity, such as the UK government trials of several different e-voting systems at the May 2002 local government elections. India has selectively used electronic voting machines (EVMs) since 1989, but this year EVMs were used in all 543 parliamentary constituencies across 700,000 voting stations for India's 670 million voters (Haidar 2004). For the Indian elections, 1.1 million non-networked EVMs were promoted for reducing invalid voting, improving secrecy of voting data, facilitating quick and accurate counting and reducing the cost of traditional ballot paper driven process (ECI 2004). For the local Liverpool Council and Sheffield Council in the UK, an integrated system of electronic voting and
electronic counting of votes has been used, through which votes were lodged via telephone, Internet, electronic kiosk, mobile phone (SMS) as well as conventional polling stations and post (Barry et al. 2002, p. 5).

While e-voting may be promoted as a means of encouraging greater participation in non-compulsory voting jurisdictions, evidence of this practice is debatable and not as relevant to Australia, in which voting is compulsory. A recent report of e-voting in the UK indicated that providing the facilities to e-vote did not substantially increase voter participation (LGA 2002, p. 4). Some encouraging uses of the new technology to increase voter participation have been recorded, such as Done’s study of the use of Internet voting in the 2000 Arizona Democratic presidential primary elections (Done 2003, p. 261). At the time of writing, US States are debating the first set of standards governing how e-voting systems should operate in forthcoming presidential elections.

The use of e-voting as a means for opinion polling on an ongoing basis has been controversial for some time. The idea of elected representatives being able to collect direct and instant feedback from their constituents is both powerful and potentially transformative. Proposals, such as Ross Perot’s model of the electronic town hall, have met criticism for promoting governance by opinion polling rather than true democratic representation (Lowi 1992). With reference to the televised polls of the French elections of 1992, French theorist Paul Virilio argues that “the televised poll is now a mere pale simulation of the ancient rallying of citizens” (Virilio 1995, p. 33). He is rightly concerned that this kind of decision-making by polling risks devaluing representative democracy to "opinion democracy".

This kind of criticism is not without justification, insofar as there is a risk that opinion-polling is too readily equated with democratic participation at the expense of a much broader, deeper and more significant notion of political participation and what it means to belong to a democratic community. Instantaneous polling may be a useful indicator of public sentiment, provided the conditions are in place to ensure that informed decisions are made, based on balanced information and resources, as well as a critical awareness of the agenda of those framing the question/issue polled. As Davis and Owen point out, there is something seductive about the communicative power of e-democracy, whose advocates promote the idea that “at the touch of few keystrokes, opinions can be expressed and communicated far and wide. Yet such rapid reaction should not be the lodestone of public policy resolution” (Davis and Owen 1998, p. 127).

(iii) Informal participation

A third type of e-democratic activity concerns informal channels of communication and activism taken using ICT. Examples of these include forms of citizen weblogging and Hacktivist. Citizen-generated weblogs reflect a relatively minor but no less significant outlet for individual expression, in which citizens use the Internet as an open forum to express and share their opinions of Australian politics.\(^5\)

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5 At the time (early 1990s), the US Presidential candidate’s proposal for teledemocracy sought to “short-circuit representative government” by using direct plebiscitary decision-making to stimulate public deliberation (Schudson 1992, pp. 41-45).

6 Australian politicians have also not made use of weblogs (‘blogs’) in the way that politicians such as US Presidential candidate John Kerry have. An infamous (and somewhat vulgar) example of a uniquely Australian take on political blogging can be seen at mark1.tblog.com/, in which the author satirises Australia’s current Labor Party leader, Mark Latham.
Hacktivism is a more controversial but important dimension of e-democracy. It is important to firstly differentiate “hackers” from “crackers”. Contrary to their representation in popular media, hackers promote technical proficiency, a mistrust of authority, that there should be unlimited access to computers, and a firm belief that computers can improve human lives. But more importantly, they promote the idea that all information should be free (Levy 1994). The hackers’ “jargon file”, which is compiled collectively on the Net, states that hackers believe that “information-sharing is a powerful positive good, and that it is an ethical duty of hackers to share their expertise by writing free software and facilitating access to information and to computing resources wherever possible” (Jargon File, cited in Himanen, Torvalds and Castells 2001, p. vii). "Crackers", on the other hand, are seen by hackers as responsible for unauthorized access and network disruptions in which there is a lack of both political significance and technological proficiency demonstrated by these attackers (metac0m 2003). “Hacktivism” refers to the combination of hacking and public activism in a deliberate and usually political way. Hacktivism is about freedom of information and freedom of movement in cyberspace. Civil disobedience and protest are important political tools of Hacktivists, who achieved a high level of visibility during the 1990s throughout the world, from attacks on the Chinese government, to Chiapas separatists and in response to NATO’s action in Kosovo (Hopper 1999). There is evidence to suggest that the infamous WANK worm, which in 1989 confronted NASA scientists with the banner: “Worms against nuclear killers”, emanated from Australia (New York Times 1999; Denning 2004).

These informal activities of e-democracy are concerned with the control of information – often in response to the forms of e-government under heading (i) above. Activities in this area reflect the capacity of technologically proficient individuals and groups to decentralise power away from institutionalised forms of democratic dialogue (i.e. through legitimised government channels) and conventional commercial broadcast media, to the micro-level of individual and/or small group behaviour. Hacktivism explicitly promotes the decentralisation of authority (Levy 1994). This type of informal political activity is important because the participants, be they blogger, hacker or cracker, use the technology for non-institutionalised forms of power; or at the very least, they operate at the margins of institutionalised power, challenging it in both positive and negative ways. But there are two aspects of these informal modes of e-democracy that need to be acknowledged: firstly, Hacktivism is only one form of online activism and while it is not in itself constitutive of the diversity of networks, organisations and activism that constitute online civil society, Hacktivism highlights both the importance of collective knowledge sharing and the shifting dynamic of power inherent to new knowledge networks.

A second key issue here is that of responsibility. The blogger is often anonymous and Hacktivists have been criticised for "hiding beyond anonymity or pseudonymity. Taking responsibility is not something we see happening [with Hacktivists]. One of the critical things in environmental causes and the civil rights movement was that groups who used strong tactics and intentionally broke the law eventually came

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7 Insofar as Australia has been at the forefront of several democratic innovations, it also is home to some of the first “high-profile” hacker/crackers, who, as part of a loosely formed group known as “The Realm”, were responsible for invading several high-profile computer systems in Australia and the US during the 1980s and 1990s. But their largely apolitically motivated activities could not be classified as “hacktivist” per se; in fact, their attacks were responsible for the creation of Australia’s first federal cyber-crime legislation in 1989 under pressure from the US Government (Anderson 2003, Dreyfus 1997).
forward and took responsibility for their actions. It was owning up that really helped these movements forward" (Fowler, quoted in Hopper 1999). Furthermore, the line between hacker and cracker is not always clear. This issue of responsibility challenges whether these informal modes of participation ought to be recognised as ‘democratic’.

(iv) News Media

The impact of news media is an important dimension of e-democracy because of the influence of commercial, public and civic media over the ongoing formation of democratic politics. Though significant, the intersection of new media and news providers in disseminating information (and disinformation) will not be examined within the limited space of this paper; except to highlight that issues arising from the nature, ownership and impact of mass news media are complex, problematic and central to the well-being of contemporary democratic societies. Sweden, for example, has formally recognised the “problems with the Swedish mass media in contributing to the public sphere by fulfilling the democratic indicator of enlightened understanding” (Rothstein et al. 1995). The growth of the World Wide Web has generated further issues and possibilities. Unlike the present system of heavily centralised broadcast television, the web can decentralize political discourse and has the potential to give citizens greater choice and access to information (Gilder 1992: 25-27).

The four overlapping categories of e-democracy described above are summarised in Illustration 1 below:

**Illustration 1: Basic typology of e-democratic activity**

Illustration 1 provides a basic summary of the four kinds of e-democratic activity described above in terms of the types of interactions occurring between government

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8 Similarly, the agenda of weblogs is by no means transparent. As others have observed, while US politicians use weblogs to promote accountability, this medium may encourage greater use of “spin” (Adams 2003).
and citizenry. The vertical arrows show the ‘top-down’ and interactive flow of communications between government and the citizenry. The horizontal arrows at the bottom depict communications between citizens and communities. Model (i) “E-government” depicts an essentially top-down approach to the delivery of information and services. Examples of this include information about taxation and civics education. Model (ii), “Participatory technologies”, shows that interaction is enabled between government and citizenry, as well as between citizens themselves, such as through online policy consultancy or community discussion forums. Model (iii) “Informal” illustrates how independent agents, such as hackers and bloggers, bypass formal government channels while seeking to influence decision-making. The curved upwards arrows depict the bypassing of formal government lines of communication and information by independent agents, such as hackers seeking to influence government decision-making and/or decentre power away from government and other loci of information control. The role of News Media (iv) is depicted as a horizontal line across the three other categories to represent the news media’s influence over face-to-face and electronically mediated interactions across all three other models of interaction. News Media are an important source of information for citizens, hackers, crackers and government alike. The interactions of agents (government, citizen, bloggers, hackers, etc) are all shown to be influenced to some extent by News Media. The downward spike in this horizontal line refers to the influence of smaller group of public and civic journalists.

Some challenges to e-democracy in Australia

A significant challenge to the technological enhancement and extension of democratic participation emerges from Australia’s distinctive political history. Australia has an impressive record of democratic innovation and social progress. It was one of the earliest countries to abolish property qualifications for voting, give women the right to vote and stand for parliament, introduce a universal franchise and hold secret ballots (otherwise known as “Australian ballots”) (SLCRC 1995, p. 9).

Despite Australia’s spirit of democratic innovation, Parliamentary democracy during the latter twentieth century is characterised by a reluctance of those in power to extend the scope of citizen participation in any substantial way. This inherent conservatism in Australian politics is consistent with Magarey’s (2000) study of parliamentarians’ use of web-based technologies described above. Efforts to introduce forms of direct democracy to revitalise the popular sovereign, such as the ‘citizen initiated referendum’ (CIR), in which ordinary citizens can petition directly for legislative change, have been rejected on a number of occasions at both State/Territory and Federal Levels (Davidson 1997, pp. 237-239; Walker 1993). As Davidson argues, “When we turn to consider international ‘best practice’ concerning direct democracy, Australia continues to lag well behind. The introduction of direct democracy has so far been rejected… despite observations that indicate how particularly apt the technological advance of information highways make such notions in Australia”. The potential role of technology has been absent from recent debates of the revivification of Australian democracy (Davidson 1997, p. 237-240). If anything, there has instead been a steady concentration of decision-making to the federal centre of government since 1901. The two-party system in Australian politics, growing influence of the executive over the legislative process and delegation of legislative power from parliament to the ministry has contributed to a “ministerial absolutism”,...
under which the average citizen has become increasingly distanced from ‘expert’ policy making (Evans, in Walker et al. 1993, p. 5, Walker 1993). Or, to use Stephen Coleman’s (1999) nomenclature, the proximity between citizen and representative has widened.

It is interesting to note projects such as the Democracy Project in Denmark and recent digital television experiments of the UK have been developed in response to poor voter turn-outs at elections and a perceived general apathy of citizens (Trinitas 2002). With the increase in the capacity of societies to generate and disseminate information, there is “at the same time increasing disenchantment on the part of citizens towards many of the institutions and procedures of democracy” (Coleman, Taylor and van de Donk 1999, p. 4). Echoing Putnam’s (1995, 1996) findings of “civic disengagement” in the US, research during the last decade has indicated an increasing sense of civic deficit, personal alienation, powerlessness and a declining feeling of community amongst Australians (Walsh and Salvaris 1998, Mackay 1993, p. 25, Civics Expert Group 1994, SLCRC 1995). E-democracy is not only about exploring new processes of governance and formal participation (such as CIR); it is also about how the technology can be used to address attendant problems related to the subjective dimensions of democratic citizenship in which “knowledgeable citizens… are equipped to participate in the exercise of the rights and responsibilities which they, as Australian citizens, share” (Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs 1995, p. 3). The “digital divide” continues to be a major challenge to the formation of e-democracy. In the information age, it is necessary for citizens to have access to the skills and resources to be able to use the technology in an informed and effective way. E-democracy is about cultivating the political and technological literacies necessary to critically engage democratic ideas and processes across both electronically mediated and face-to-face environments. Citizens must be able to access the technological resources (e.g. broadband Internet\(^9\)) to participate both online and through conventional means (such as polling booths) (ABS 2003).

Much of the current interest in e-democracy is, however, largely to do with saving time, increasing accuracy and accessibility in the administration and provision of government services. While an informed citizen is a positive step to revitalising democracy, an informed and participating citizen is a far better measure of democratic well-being. Nevertheless, the development of e-democracy in Australia will need to move beyond those debates in the literature and mass media that equate e-democracy with direct democracy.\(^{10}\) While e-democracy may draw upon “a subtle and complex fusing of elements of direct democracy and new ways of representation” (Hacker and van Dijk 2000, p.3), the most visible and likely developments in the Australian context will involve an augmentation of existing practices of representative democracy. Drawing further from Hacker and van Dijk, e-democracy is best defined

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9 As of September 2003, around one quarter (5.2 million) of Australians subscribed to the Internet. The vast majority of these users are dial-up subscribers, although this number as a proportion of total subscribers fell below 90% for the first time in 2003, corresponding to an increase in broadband uptake. There were over 650,000 broadband subscribers by the end of September 2003. From March to September 2003, Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) subscribers grew by 78% (163,000) (ABS 2003).

10 See, for example, Grossman 1995, Morris 1999. In a return to the model of classical democracy, ‘direct democracy’ involves increasing citizen involvement in decision making by enabling them to directly vote on key issues of concern. Switzerland - one of the first countries to utilise direct democracy - provides for legislative referendum in its constitution and for citizen’s initiative in its modification. Citizen initiated legislation seeks to increase power “from below” by investing citizens with direct legislative power to create and shape law directly through referendums. Within this framework, legislation can be initiated by the petition of a specified number of voters (eg 50, 000).
as “a collection of attempts to practise democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using ICT and CMC instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional ‘analogue’ political practices” (Hacker and van Dijk 2000, p. 1).

Conclusion

Of the four categories of e-democracy described in this paper: government services and administration; participatory technologies; informal modes of participation; and news media, Australia is most developed in the first area of e-government. In international terms, however, Australia lags behind in other areas. In her study of parliamentarians use of the Internet several years ago, Magarey concluded that “there is certainly no Internet revolution in Australian politics at the moment” (2000, p. 58), and there is little suggest that the situation has significantly changed since her study. The recent history of Australian parliamentary democracy is one characterised by conservatism (both in the use of new technology and otherwise), despite Australia’s history of democratic innovation.

There are positive developments in some areas of e-democracy in Australia. Initiatives in e-democracy are underway at State and local levels. The technological infrastructure required to support these initiatives is becoming increasingly diffuse. New developments, such as interactive television, will provide opportunity for further experimentation.

The future of e-democracy in Australia needs to be understood in terms of how ICTs can be used to enhance and extend spheres of democratic activity. As Rodotà has observed, “By overcoming the obstacles of time and space, the mass media can enable more people to take part in debates and decision-making and attend meetings and assemblies, which are the distinctive signs of democracy” (Rodotà 1995, p. 3).

Similarly, Rosén’s observations of Sweden are relevant to Australia: “The advent of the Internet will not change the substance of politics, but it will give politicians and the public a new forum in which they can meet and discuss… Skilfully used, new communication media can amplify the power of grassroots groups to gather critical information, organize political action, sway public opinion and guide policy-making” (Rosén 2001).

A number of international examples of this kind of activity are worth citing. Brazil’s city council of Porto Alegre has used email and the web to enable citizens to discuss and vote on issues (Hobsbawn 2003). In the US, Minnesota E-Democracy seeks to increase participation by hosting online public spaces for citizen interaction on public issues (http://www.e-democracy.org/). Through e-Citizen Estonia, Estonian citizens have used an online consultation process to comment on draft laws and suggest new ones (http://tom.riik.ee) (ASPA & UNDPEPA 2001, p. 71). The Netherlands’ Minister for e-Democracy matters has engaged discussion with the public through online chat rooms. In North Jutland, Denmark, a Democracy Project has attempted to counter low voter turn-out by using ICT to make regional decision-making process more understandable to its citizens (www.nordpol.dk). Recently in the UK, a trial group of voters were given a PIN number and invited to take part in an e-voting pilot scheme via interactive digital television, the internet, telephone and special kiosks. (BBC 2003) In the US, the technology is now available to use digital TV to cast election ballots (Featherly 2003).
As Hacker and van Dijk point out, many assertions regarding digital democracy are “hyperbolic, gamelike or unrealistic, including those about… new forms of agora, ‘virtual communities’, ‘teledemocracy’ and a new age of citizen participation. While portions of these claims are supported by some data, most suffer from over-simplistic assumptions about human communication and about democratic political systems. (Hacker and van Dijk 2000, p.2). This is where a vision of e-democracy is important. As the technological opportunities for e-democracy increase in scope, there first needs to be more reflection on what it means to live in a democratic society. Having a vision of how the technology is best used is an important dimension of e-democracy (Rogers and Malhorta, in Hacker and van Dijk 2000, p. 25). When considering what e-democracy means in Australia, the deeper and older imperative, as thinkers across the political spectrum from Hayek to Macpherson have identified, is to clarify exactly what is meant by a ‘democratic society’. Because democratic formation is an ongoing process, this process clarification is, by necessity, ongoing. As with democracy in general, e-democracy is organic (Hacker and van Dijk 2000, p.2). And as Coleman points out, the advent of the Internet opens “the possibility of giving democracy the one thing it hasn't had in the past, which is a degree of interactivity where the public and the people who represent them have a closer proximity to one another. And you give the Internet a social purpose - something that every significant communication medium has had in the past: a political relevance” (Coleman 1999).
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