

Chapter 94

Evolving Local E–Government: A Cohesive Policy Approach

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ABSTRACT

Effective policy frameworks are essential when developing e-government projects. Participatory e-government practices that facilitate civic engagement depend upon a combination of direct and indirect information and communication technology (ICT) policies. Direct policies focus on infrastructure development and enhancing citizens' ICT adoption and use. Indirectly, ICTs can be used to support policy processes through, for example, information dissemination and the provision of spaces for deliberation. This chapter examines Australian e-government initiatives, suggesting that local governments provide a useful context for online civic participation and engagement. However, local initiatives are often developed on an ad hoc basis and are largely limited to the provision of one-way information and service delivery features. Conversely, federal documentation addresses both direct and indirect ICT policy areas and stresses the value of online civic participation. Yet, there is a significant disconnection between federal ideals of engagement and the actual implementation of two-way participatory practices, with service delivery mechanisms again prioritised. This chapter suggests that greater online civic engagement may be achieved through a policy approach that combines national guidance and resources with local knowledge, while using policies to support ICTs and ICTs to support policy processes.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer authorities the chance to develop the democratic quality of representative government through the provision of new avenues for civic participation in decision-making. Large-scale infrastructure improvements such as the Australian Federal Government's *National Broadband*

Network (NBN) provide the frameworks for increased online interaction and are promoted as enhancing electronic government. It is intended that this Australian development will enable online engagement through opportunities for greater public involvement in policy and service delivery (Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE), 2011). A key aim of the Australian Federal Government's *National*

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Digital Economy Strategy is to have four out of five Australians engaging with governments online by the year 2020, with digitally aware state and local authorities driving this engagement (DBCDE, 2011). The Federal Government also recognises that advancing online participation requires action by and coordination through all levels of government (DBCDE, 2011). In addition to the provision of improved infrastructure, such a goal will require broad guidance and support for authorities implementing online practices. While the networked technology of the Internet allows for open-ended communication, the democratic quality of online mechanisms depends upon government application of the technology (see Catinat & Vedel, 2000), and the policies used to guide efforts undertaken.

The implementation of online spaces for citizen engagement by local, state and federal authorities calls for strong policy guidance, particularly to ensure equity of technology application throughout the country. A combination of direct and indirect policies facilitates civic access to ICTs, the development of appropriate digital skills, the provision of relevant content to which citizens can contribute, and helps to ensure that citizens' online political participation impacts decision-making processes (see Cohen, van Geenhuizen, & Nijkamp, 2005). Such considerable goals require resource and knowledge coordination between the different levels of government to optimise the development and use of the policies and practices employed. National-level governments can provide appropriate guidelines to create and implement e-government practices and fund infrastructure improvements. In contrast, local knowledge about an area's requirements and citizens' needs can be utilised by national governments to offer effective, appropriate and integrated policy approaches to ICT infrastructure development. Local governments also provide a useful context for digital skill development programs and targeted participatory e-government, particularly as municipalities occupy the spaces where the effects of state and

national initiatives materialise and as increased civic interest in everyday local issues encourages active involvement (Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2009; Bradford, 2008). This chapter suggests that a cohesive policy approach is needed to offer long-term, sustainable frameworks for participatory e-government development.

This chapter focuses on e-government in Australia, highlighting the impact of national policies and initiatives on the development of local online participation methods. Australia has a three-tiered level of representative government that works within a parliamentary system of democracy. There are 562 local governments, with broad diversity in population and geographic sizes. Australian local governments have limited authority, with their responsibilities largely restricted to day-to-day services including: household waste collection; the provision and maintenance of parkland, play equipment, local libraries and community centres; local road developments; and town planning. State governments are responsible for education and policing, which often fall under the responsibility of local governments in other countries. Local e-government in Australia is currently advancing autonomously from federal guidance, with ad hoc ICT applications frequently implemented without guiding policy documentation. The result has been a broad focus on one-way information dissemination and service delivery online, with many local authorities overlooking the potential use of ICTs as platforms for two-way civic involvement in policy processes and to aid civic connection with representatives. This chapter suggests that a cohesive policy approach with greater coordination between federal and local governments would facilitate the steady evolution of local participatory e-government practices, which offer contexts for civic discussions and engagement with government. First, however, this chapter outlines the importance of local e-government, and suggests how policies can be framed to facilitate participatory online practices.

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