Digitally disengaged: Government resistance to civic participation

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Abstract
This paper examines digital engagement through local e-government. Drawing from a local government case study, it suggests that limitations to online civic involvement are often the result of insufficient government reception of, and responses to, citizens’ views. Interviews with local representatives illustrate inadequate digital education and broad reluctance towards civic inclusion in political processes. Nevertheless, the local government established a consultation website to facilitate increased citizen discussion and participation in decision-making. Examination of this website reveals intermittent and generic government responses, with little feedback on how civic views inform the actions undertaken. Citizens’ posts demonstrate disenchantment due to scarce government involvement and identify that the website may be a tokenistic attempt to placate the community. In addition to providing frameworks for online participation, e-government engagement requires governments to consider civic views, contribute to debate, and enable citizen input to impact decision-making.

Keywords
e-government; local government; citizen participation; digital (dis)engagement

Local E-Government: Political Willingness towards E-Participation
Governments are increasingly utilizing e-government to aid information dissemination, improve service delivery, and enable citizen participation. Local governments offer key contexts for e-government for reasons of scale and as they occupy the site where the majority of citizen interactions with government occur (see, for example, O’Toole, 2009; Bradford, 2008; Jimenez et al., 2012). However, use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is politically shaped (Chadwick, 2011). Government centricity in e-government developments often emphasizes mechanisms that aid efficiency, largely overlooking civic inclusion in political processes (Verdegem & Hauttekeete, 2010).

Jensen’s (2009) empirical investigation into citizens’ interactions with local government highlights that offline communication channels are more likely to impact policy-making than online participation methods. Moreover, ICTs are often only used by governments to suit particular priorities and to respond to political stresses, rather than on account of advanced technological and communicative capabilities (Jensen, 2009). In order words, when ICTs are used to communicate with citizens, it is often reactive rather than proactive in nature. Jensen (2009) further notes that “there is little political will to use the Internet to facilitate greater levels of participation” (p. 298). Civic participation through e-government therefore requires a governmental culture change to be receptive and response to civic views (Gauld et al., 2009).

Following these findings, this paper explores the understandings and experiences of political representatives in relation to ICT use for civic engagement, and examines whether current opportunities for e-participation influence local decision-making. Findings are drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted with five councilors from the Australian municipality of the City of Casey (Casey) and through examination of Casey’s civic consultation website.²

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² In accordance with ethics requirements, interviewed councilors cannot be identified by name. Each has subsequently been assigned with a color.
E-Participation in the City of Casey

Key e-government and digital engagement findings that emerged from councilor interviews include substantial variations in ICT knowledge and broad resistance towards civic inclusion in decision-making. In relation to ICT knowledge, on the one hand, some councilors were aware of ways ICTs can save time, increase information dissemination, and facilitate complementary understandings of political issues (Councilor Red; Councilor Black). There was also evidence that councilors recognized digital divide constraints including access and literacy issues (Councilor Yellow; Councilor Blue; Councilor Red). On the other hand, there was considerable confusion surrounding the actual technologies. This was evident in comments such as:

*I think broadband is available. Everyone keeps talking about broadband and whatever the other one is called... I don’t know whether broadband is a must have (Councilor White).*

*I don’t get contacted by anyone via the internet. Unless, does emailing come under the internet? (Councilor Yellow).*

These types of comments suggest there is a need for further ICT education amongst local representatives.

On the topic of civic inclusion in decision-making, interviewed councilors demonstrated reluctance towards both on and offline methods of citizen participation, as well as use of civic input in political processes. For example, councilors viewed petitions as “dodgy” (Councilor Yellow) and citizen attendance at council meetings as “a waste of time” (Councilor White). Direct contact with representatives was the only “genuine” (Councilor Yellow) form of participation, provided there were enough citizens with similar concerns. When there was civic involvement in previous issues, the decisions “never really got down to the citizens’ influence” (Councilor Black). When discussing two-way discussion forums, Councilor White indicated that citizens are largely uninformed and too emotional to effectively contribute to debate, with civic involvement unnecessary given representatives are elected to make decisions. One of the rare positive comments was the suggestion that polls could be sent out via email to gauge public opinion (Councilor Blue).

In regards to the potential development of online practices, negative understandings of ICT-enabled practices far outweighed positive comments. For example, there was concern surrounding the increased visibility associated with webcasting council meetings:

*Several councilors wouldn’t want to have been put under the pump of having their actions broadcast... fear of being recorded would’ve been too much (Councilor Red).*

Overall, councilors’ comments suggest a failure amongst representatives to fully understand and appreciate the importance of citizen participation in political decision-making, and the role ICTs may play in this process. These observations do not bode well for the likely development and success of e-participation practices. The council has, nonetheless, continued to develop its online presence with the inclusion (in 2011) of Casey Conversations, a civic consultation website on municipal issues.

Casey Conversations (caseyconversations.com.au) is intended to help the local government understand the needs and preferences of the community and enable civic involvement to shape decision-making. The development and moderation of the website are outsourced, and no elected representatives have posted comments (as of February 2013), with an administrator instead responsible for official comments. Examination of the discussion forums revealed that the administrator’s comments accounted for approximately 25 percent of all postings since the site’s inception. However, these posts are sporadic, with numerous comments occurring on individual days and long periods in between. Furthermore, these posts frequently only offer generic, thank-you for your feedback replies to citizens.

Citizens’ comments illustrate continuing disenchantment with the council’s insufficient responsiveness through the website, the lack of feedback surrounding use of civic input, and how the site is being used to shift responsibility for issues. Examples of these concerns include:
So after more than 4 months of community feedback for this topic, may I ask what has actually been provided to the councilors regarding this feedback and if their staunch 'advocating' has achieved anything? Also it seems from the lack of updates and other new topics in general that community feedback is no longer sought after (Daniel, April 13, 2012).¹

Not one of the issues raised on this forum has resulted in a fix, just handballing blame from one sad and sorry government department to another and back again (Not Happy, March 19, 2012).

I believe this site is more of a front to stop us calling and bothering Casey. Seriously will we get any feedback from this? (Peterk, July 19, 2011).

These and other citizen comments suggest that Casey Conversations may be a tokenistic attempt at engagement designed to placate the community. There is little evidence to suggest that representatives engage with the site, or that civic input is used to inform decision-making.

This case study illustrates that digital (dis)engagement is influenced by institutional settings, with governments able to act as mechanisms of resistance to new communicative practices. Evans-Cowley and Conroy (2009) indicate that “[t]he success of e-government will be tied to citizens’ willingness to use the tools” (p. 284). Extending this argument, this paper suggests e-government success equally depends upon the willingness and capabilities of government officials. Citizens are accessing and using Casey Conversations, yet their discussions are not informing decision-making. The government has failed to recognize that digital engagement requires receptive and responsive ongoing actions, which should be incorporated into the council’s everyday operations. Government resistance to online civic participation is furthermore exacerbated by problems such as limited ICT education and misconceptions surrounding the value of citizen participation. Such institutional barriers need to be addressed to facilitate digital engagement.

References


¹ Minor typographical errors in citizens’ comments have been corrected to aid readability.