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eGovernment, The Citizen and Equity

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RESEARCH PANEL

E-GOVERNMENT, THE CITIZEN AND EQUITY

Panellists:

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Issues:

In the past decade the notion that modern technology with the internet, mobile computing and enhanced communication technology at its heart, can transform the administrative procedures of Government at all levels and at the same time enhance the democratic opportunities of all citizens, has taken hold. Many countries have rolled out extensive programmes to reform their administrative procedures with the new technologies. Both developed and developing countries have taken far-reaching initiatives.

As an example, the UK Government set an initial target of the end of 2005 for achieving a comprehensive system of e-government for central and local government with central government funding. "The £80million ODPM funded National Projects programme aims to bring together councils, central government, the private sector and others to define and deliver projects and national Local e-Government solutions (Local e-Government, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, www.localgov.gov.uk).

The panel sets out to explore a number of issues relating the e-Government and e-Democracy initiatives:

1. The problem of equity. Access to e-technology is not universal. Do the e-government schemes ensure that citizens with no access, restricted access or difficulties with using the technology, get a service not less good than those who do not have these problems? What are the implications of providing an equivalent service in terms of procedures and costs?

2. The problem of providing universal access. What programmes are being put into place to increase the availability of the technologies so that no citizen is disadvantaged by restricted access or by an inability to make full use of the technology if available. Note that providing access via facilities at public libraries or internet cafes is not the equivalent of having the technology at home. The problem of access is particularly difficult in rural areas.
3. The problem of citizen awareness. e-Government and e-Democracy can only be successful if the citizen knows what is going on, understands the reasons why, and shares in the perception that they are desirable. The problem has been recognised and efforts to obtain citizen participation are in place. But to what extent have citizens been involved in the decision process? To what extent have they been able to influence the directions in which plans are being made? To what extent are they even aware of the initiatives that are being taken? Anecdotal evidence in a particular rural area in the UK suggests that a large proportion of citizens do not even recognise the terms e-Government and e-Democracy and are unaware that they will be personally affected.
4. The problem of citizen compliance. It is not at all clear to what extent citizens accept e-Government or want to participate in its design or realisation. The same anecdotal evidence from a rural area has shown that perceptions range from indifference to animosity with only a very few showing any interest. Are the programmes set up in such a way that citizens are aware of them and are easily able to participate in them?
5. The role of back office integration in promoting citizen participation. In order that e-based services assume an on-going efficacy and meet with an active acceptance on the part of citizens, it is necessary that the administrative players that operate in a back office context remain actively and constantly involved in the adoption and on-going use of e-government technologies. This continuous attention to the detail of specific technological/administrative processes should take place within a broader context in which higher level actors are committed not only to effecting a universal integration of the relevant information systems and sub-systems but also to engaging in a spontaneous and open exchange of all pertinent knowledge. Such an assumption of responsibility would lead to an effective relinquishment of power by the established governmental/bureaucratic authorities and a consequent emergence of participation and autonomy on the part of ordinary citizens.

An understanding and investigation of these problems requires an interdisciplinary approach. The panel will provide some of the elements of such an interdisciplinary approach and include at least one panelist engaged in the process of gaining public confidence and citizen participation as a e-Government champion.

Presentations:

Frank Land as chairman will introduce the session and set out the five issues noted above.

Maddalena Sorrentino is co-chairman of the panel. She takes the perspective of the ideal designer and implementer of E-Government projects.

A realistic approach to the effective implementation of E-Government initiatives requires the adoption of a series of methodological guidelines: a) an approach to knowledge that conceives of it not just as *knowledge management* but *knowledge in use*; b) the perception of E-Government as not just a *project* but also a *process*; c) a recognition of the intensively interactive nature of E-Government initiatives; and d) an acceptance that E-Government initiatives are constituted by complex, collective experiences that have been referred to with the metaphor, *garbage can*. I will adopt such an approach to discuss the work I have been doing in relation to the implementation of the Italian E-Government action plan. In particular, I will focus on how the government's emphasis on a *rational* approach to the introduction of ICT in the context of local public administration is having the negative effect of directing attention, resources and effort towards the *output* rather than towards the *outcome* and *impact* of innovation.

Kim Viborg Andersen suggests that the evolution of technologies represented in the E-Government palette includes not only self-service and e-mail technologies, but involves also text and video chat media. In a Danish municipality, the online dialogue between the citizens and the case workers is seen as an instrument to provide better service by being more responsive. The discussion focuses on a research project which investigates how the gate-keepers' exercise of authority both shapes and is being shaped by their use of chat media in the municipality. In the panel, I will illustrate and discuss 1) how are gate-keepers' decision making procedures influencing the adoption and exploitation of chat media, 2) how is gate-keepers' client-processing attitude impacting the interfacing mechanisms, and 3) are the gate-keepers mechanisms for rationing service influencing the innovative use of chat facilities?

Mike Cushman notes that equity in E-Government access has traditionally been seen as a problem of ensuring physical access to technology. While this is clearly important, at least as significant are the skills and dispositions of potential users. There has been less attention to understanding the complex set of literacy, language and IT skills that people need to use e-government websites effectively or to the gap that people described as socially excluded see between themselves and the services and opportunities that local and national government seek to make available over the internet. I will report some of the early findings from the Pencil Project (How People Encounter E-Illiteracy and how they can Take Action to Overcome it). This is an action research project which focuses its investigations on a disadvantaged housing estate in south London investigating the experiences of people with no or few IT skills and looking at what is happening to people left outside the electronic loop and exploring whether the move of Government and commerce to the internet and other computer systems will mitigate social exclusion or whether, on balance, it will exacerbate it. It will try to point some lessons both for service and training providers.

Leela Damodoran observes that fundamental to the success of e-Government is the active engagement of citizens in the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of the entire process. There are many prerequisites for active citizen engagement – the essential ones include: the opportunity to influence the agenda-setting process; awareness and understanding of existing/proposed e-government processes; recognition of the relevance of these to the quality of life of the individual citizen; knowledge of the potential benefits offered by e-Government. There are a multiplicity of creative techniques and methods for engaging citizens but these have not become accepted practices in IS development processes. Utilising citizen engagement techniques as established good practices is a further prerequisite for the success of e-Government since they are key to promoting social inclusion.

Mary Reid's focus is on enhancing democratic engagement between citizens, councillors and councils in local government, through active participation between elections. Her introduction is based on a case study, the National Project for Local e-Democracy in England is unique. It is one of the largest e-democracy projects in the world, with government funding of 6 million euros. During the development phase of the project, twenty-two pilots were run and evaluated by local councils. These included, amongst others, online consultations, surgeries, petitions, panels, weblogging, websites for the elderly and for young people, issues forums, moderation skills, games, and policy tracking. The project completed its development phase in March 2005, and the next twelve months are being devoted to packaging the products and rolling them out to local councils around the country.

About the Panelists:

Frank Land is Emeritus Professor in the Department of Information Systems at the London School of Economics. He helped to establish the Information Systems Department at the LSE in the late 1960s, and has been Professor of Information Management at the London Business School and Visiting Professor at the Wharton School, Sydney University, Indian Institute of Management and Bond University. His main interests have been in the contribution sociotechnical methods can make in the design and implementation of information systems. Currently he is involved in research into e-government and e-democracy and knowledge management.

Maddalena Sorrentino researches in information systems and organizational change. She teaches Information Systems & Public Sector at the University of Milan (Department of social and political studies). She has published in academic proceedings, such as ECIS, DEXA eGOV, Bled eConference, ICIS (OASIS) and is the author of seven books. Maddalena also has extensive experience of IS evaluation in the public sector. She participates in the Milan University IT Committee as the representative of the Dean of the Political Science Faculty.

Kim Viborg Andersen is professor at the Copenhagen Business School at the Department of Informatics. He is head for the Center for Research on IT in Policy Settings (CIPS) and has conducted numerous quantitative and qualitative studies on IT in government from the early 1990s till now. He has been visiting scholar at the University of Örebro in Sweden, Deakin University in Australia, Tokyo University and University of

California at Irvine. Kim is vice-chair of the AIS SIG on e-government and on the IFIP 8.4 on interdisciplinary e-business.

Mike Cushman is a research fellow in information systems at the London School of Economics. His previous research projects have been on organizational learning and knowledge use and dissemination in the construction industry and developing innovative applications of problem structuring methods. Before joining LSE, he worked in community adult education, developing provision for non-users particularly in the fields of literacy, numeracy and rights education.

Leela Damodoran is professor of Participative Design & Change Management in the Department of Information Science at Loughborough University. She leads the Information, Technology and Society research group, focusing on the human and social aspects of informatics. As part of this agenda her team has advised Government on major planned change associated with the proposed switchover to digital television. Their influential report, "Analogue to Digital Switchover: Human Aspects of Adoption", proposing strategies for promoting social inclusion and enhancing public access to information, has been published at: www.digitaltelevision.gov.uk. Recent research projects carried out in the area of e-government include: a study to promote the awareness and uptake of e-services offered by local government; an exploration of the extent to which e-government in the UK is developing as a socio-technical system; an investigation of the usability of a sample of UK local government websites; an survey of users' needs for tourist information on local government websites; and a scenario-based assessment of information relevance on a sample of local government websites.

Mary Reid was elected to the Council of the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames (a London borough) in 1997. For four years she was opposition spokesperson for Education and Leisure. When her group formed a new administration in 2002, Mary took on an Executive portfolio named Participation and Communication, which placed e-government at the heart of the three way relationship between the Council, citizens and councillors. She has established Kingston as one of the most innovative Councils in the UK in e-government.

Since November 2003 Mary has chaired the National Project for Local e-Democracy. She also serves on the e-Government Task Group of the Local Government Association, which acts as a collective voice for local councils in England.

In her professional life, for many years Mary lectured in Computing in Further Education. She is now a well established educational author, having published twelve books on ICT (Information and Communication Technology). Mary Reid also has a small web design business, and her websites include several for Members of Parliament, as well as for community organisations. In 2002, one of her political sites won the New Statesman New Media Award for Elected Representatives.