IR14 Panel: Conceptualizing non-users of the internet and mapping digital (dis)engagement

Driven by the government, Australia's National Broadband Network (NBN) will reshape telecommunications infrastructure by rolling out very high speed broadband networks, with the expectation that ubiquitous connectivity will bring value to all. By highlighting perennial issues of digital engagement and inclusion, this panel questions whether enabling ubiquitous connectivity is sufficient to bring widespread benefit across society. Drawing from a conceptual framework that problematizes and redefines the concept of non-users of the internet, the five papers presented foreground concerns surrounding digital engagement by highlighting mechanisms of resistance. A variety of empirical methodological approaches are used to examine opportunities and challenges for less engaged users in Australia. The papers offer a range of perspectives on digital disengagement within the context of the public's everyday internet use. Together, these papers provide broad insight into the appropriation of digital technologies, and responses from both the public sector and communities towards fostering digital engagement. Rather than assuming that the provision of information and communication technology (ICT) will render effective uses, emphasis is placed on the ways that users and organizations resist new technologies and the context in which such resistance unfolds.

The first paper, "Conceptualizing the non- and low users of the internet", provides a broad framework to investigate digital engagement and offers context for the specific case studies presented by other panelists. While there have been studies that examine different uses of the internet, less attention has been given to the varied degrees of non or low level uses. Acknowledging that there is a considerable variation among non-users, the paper examines a broader spectrum of non to low Internet uses and conceptualizes these in terms of digital disengagement.

Second, "Users and non-users of next generation broadband" presents a case study of household broadband adoption and non-adoption in Brunswick, Victoria in Australia, which is one of the early release sites of the Australian NBN. The paper identifies that adoption of broadband does not occur in isolation, but as part of increasingly dense household media ecology of digital infrastructures, devices, services and knowledge.

The third paper, "Mum. Dad. Do you need some help with that? Empowering older Australian adults in a digital era", examines the challenges middle and older aged people experience while adapting to the digital technologies used to communicate with family members. It explores limitations in digital media literacy, particularly surrounding understandings of devices, forms of connectivity, and installation of devices, and highlights how digital connectivity may cause intergenerational tensions.

The final paper, "Digitally disengaged: Government resistance to civic participation", examines digital engagement through an Australian local government study conducted in the City of Casey, Victoria. It highlights government non-use of official spaces for civic participation, and suggests that current limitations to online involvement are often the result of insufficient government reception of, and responses to, citizens' views.

The papers presented in this panel illustrate that improved access to technological infrastructure will not routinely transfer into effective use of ICTs and increased digital engagement for all, as often implicitly assumed by governments. These empirical investigations of individual users, households, communities, and organizations highlight a complex interplay between ICT infrastructure, acceptance and adoption of digital media. Individual and institutional variables and settings hold considerable roles in shaping capacity to access, literacy to use, and the effectiveness of communication through digital technologies. As such, this panel illustrates that digital engagement is influenced by the capabilities and willingness of individuals, communities and organizations to decipher, adapt to, and identify potential benefits from digital media use. This observation should be reflected in government

policies and practices intended to encourage digital inclusion. The identified issues associated with non and low Internet use indicate, however, that while digital engagement can and will be fostered, various forms of resistance towards technology use in everyday practice are also likely to persist.

Conceptualizing the (non) users of the internet

Sora Park
University of Canberra
Australia
sora.park@canberra.edu.au

Catherine Middleton
Ryerson University
Canada
catherine.middleton@ryerson.ca

Matthew Allen
Deakin University
Australia
matthew.allen@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

Most studies about internet use examine how usage differs among users and why. Less attention has been paid to the varied degrees of non-use or low levels of use. Non-adopters of digital media are usually understood as not having access to digital media. However, there is a considerable variation among them with regards to how and why they lack the connectivity. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge those who do have access but use the internet only in a limited capacity. Digital exclusion does not only occur among those who do not have access but expands to those who cannot use the internet effectively. A new type of digital exclusion is emerging due to this variation of usage and appropriation. We propose a nuanced approach in defining the various levels of internet non- and low use. Rather than highlighting how social exclusion, therefore the lack of connectivity, leads to digital exclusion, this paper looks at the various contexts in which people might be digital disengaged and therefore digitally excluded.

Keywords

digital divide; digital exclusion; internet use; broadband; non-users

Introduction

We can no longer separate the physical and digital world, and the interplay between located and distributed communications is becoming more and more significant every day. The internet and related networks gives rise, in the words of Rainie and Wellman (2012), to a new "social operating system", effectively imbricated into our daily lives, both in its absence and presence. Effective use of digital networks has become crucial for social connectedness, civic engagement and economic opportunities. The benefits of being connected range from productivity or employment gains in work, through to the capacity to engage meaningfully in social relations of both a private and public nature. In particular, as communities exploit the effectiveness of the internet, civic participation is coming to depend on connectivity (Hargattai & Walejko, 2008). Gaining and spending social capital through digital networks now defines the information society.

Broadband connectivity, designed and built to provide the technologies for populations to embrace inclusion in a networked information society, has also had a paradoxical opposite outcome. Uneven availability of technology, limited user skills and, most of all, ill-distributed awareness of the potential in such networks has meant increased risks of exclusion for some, even as others benefit. The Australian government for example envisions social inclusion being increased through its new broadband program, the National Broadband Network (NBN), believing that by extending broadband connectivity it is building a nation in which every citizen has the opportunity to participate in the community (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2012). However, merely providing home access to technologies cannot overcome longstanding barriers to use. For instance, existing socio-economic disadvantage warrants continued attention in its relation to internet use (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Many who are socially excluded also live in communities with poor broadband access, with these two factors often times reinforcing each other (Dailey, et al, 2010). Income, employment, geographic area, gender and age all play a role here (Holloway, 2002; Lengsfeld, 2011; Holfeld et al, 2008; Hargittai & Shafer, 2006; Asthana, Halliday & Gibson, 2009).

Nonetheless, we cannot assume existing social exclusion is exactly the same as digital exclusion. We need to examine why people are outside the digital mainstream, and determine the extent to which this is due to reasons of exclusion or choice. By exploring the implications such lack of participation has

on their everyday lives, we can begin to bridge the second level digital divide that occurs when physical access is less of an issue. As ubiquitous, affordable network connectivity is provided through initiatives like Australia's NBN, the question remains as to why some people do not take it up, or make limited use of it, and thus become part of the digitally excluded. While appearing connected, they are not *techno-socially* connected. As access issues recede, we need to carefully consider "non and low users" - those who have limited or partial uses of the technology.

Revisiting the digital divide

Scholars have acknowledged that the dichotomy between haves and have-nots is simplistic (Barzilai-Nahon, 2006; Middleton, Veenhof & Leith, 2010; Selwyn, 2003; Selwyn, 2004; Sourbati, 2009; Tsatsou, 2011; Verdegem & Verhoest, 2009). A more useful idea is to see the information society creating a continuum of digital inclusion and exclusion, (Warschauer 2002; Lenhart and Horrigan, 2003; Eynon & Geniets, 2012). Rather than positioning "access" as the main determinant of social exclusion, we should examine how and how much people use digital technologies particularly in relation to the different levels of skills that result in divergent uses (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006; Vicente & Lopez, 2010). This second level digital divide, amplified by the multiple levels of access, use and appropriation of technologies (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Park, 2012; Selwyn, 2004; Tsatsou, 2011; van Dijk, 2006a; Verdegem & Verhoest, 2009), must be understood now as a question of the quality and extent of digital engagement, the realization of potentials, not just the connecting and skilling of a receptive population (see Tsatsou, 2011). Gurstein's (2003) concept of effective use extends the access issue to larger concerns of how uses can benefit individuals and communities, shifting the focus to the entire process of harnessing infrastructure, hardware, software and social organizational elements for collective benefit. In order to use the online resources for beneficial activities, one must have constant access and the motivation to use various services. Meaningful use, as discussed by Ito, et al, (2008), can also reframe our awareness that access and use are not, of themselves, sufficient.

Reconceptualising non users

Studies on non adopters of digital technologies usually attempt to find out why people choose not to be connected and find no uniform reason. But they have shown that socio-economic status and associated costs of adopting new technologies are less significant than factors such as: skills and efficacy (World Internet Project, 2010), motivation and disinterest (Verdegem & Verhoest, 2009; Zickuhr, 2010), and attitudes and personal traits (Davis, 1989; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2003; Stanley, 2003; Verdegem & Verhoest, 2009; Vishwanath & Golohaber, 2003).

"Non-users" have been variously labeled and constructed as subjects of research: dropouts (Katz, Rice & Aspen, 2001), laggards (Goldenberg & Oreg, 2007), unadopters (Dailey et al, 2010), narrow frequent users, occasional users and non-users (Selwyn et al, 2005; Selwyn, 2006), unengaged and marginalized (Longley et al, 2006), non- or sporadic users (Brandtzaeg, Heim & Karahasanovic, 2010) and lapsed users (Eynon & Geniets, 2012). Such people are hard to understand as a collective, as well, since many move back and forth between being users and non users (Mehra, Merkel & Bishop, 2004).

According to Mossberger et al (2008), digital citizenship requires online participation. For this reason, they define digital citizens as those who use the internet every day. Infrequent or occasional users either might not have the skills to use the internet effectively or do not have the opportunity to develop such skills. Allen's (2010) experience of connectivity provides a useful the framework for studying internet uses and non-uses. He defines connectivity as "having and using internet connection at home" (p. 351). The experience of connectivity is the ways in which people utilize the internet to achieve a variety of outcomes in their everyday lives.

Brandtzaeg (2010) defines media behavior as the totality of human behavior in relation to new media use, which includes both the frequency of use (the level of participation) and the form of use (content and activity preference). The latter is similar to the quality of use, which can largely be determined by the motivation of the users.

By examining how and how much people use the internet and using such measures to provide a new framework of researching uses and non uses of the internet, we can link how digital engagement is related to digital inclusion among the various user typologies. Similarly, when we examine non- and low users of the internet, the context in which digital disengagement may lead to digital exclusion must be considered.

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Users and non-users of next generation broadband

Bjorn Nansen
University of Melbourne
Australia
nansenb@unimelb.edu.au

Michael Arnold
University of Melbourne
Australia
mvarnold@unimelb.edu.au

Rowan Wilken
Swinburne University
Australia
rwilken@swin.edu.au

Martin Gibbs
University of Melbourne
Australia
martin.gibbs@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

This paper explores the contexts and motivations that underpin the uptake of Australia's National Broadband Network (NBN). The findings are drawn from a mixed-methods research study of households using surveys and interviews conducted in 2011 and 2012 in an early release site of the NBN rollout. Whilst use and non-use have traditionally been treated as questions of digital access, inequality and exclusion, there is evidence for emerging forms of non-use characterized by more critical and discriminating approaches. We contribute to this evidence, but our findings suggest that use and non-use of high speed broadband do not occur in isolation or as an expression of individual choice, but as part of increasingly dense household media ecologies of digital infrastructures, devices, services and knowledge.

Keywords

Technology use; non-use; broadband; household adoption; Australia; National Broadband Network

Introduction

The issue of internet use and non-use were traditionally treated as simple questions of inequality and exclusion, accounted for in terms of lack of access to technologies, and addressed by greater provision of those technologies. More sophisticated approaches argued that personal, social, cultural and economic conditions were important to use and non-use (e.g ACMA, 2009; Warschauer, 2003); that the prevailing emphasis on technology-provision alone did little for effective use. More recently, the role of individual agency in the context of a diffusionist model of uneven yet inevitable technology adoption has been reasserted, a position which points to a growing population of individuals who actively choose to evade (Lenhart et al., 2003), reject (Wyatt, 2003) or resist digital media (Satchell and Dourish, 2009).

This paper draws attention to the ways individual agency is mediated by the relational, material and interdependent contexts in which use and non-use takes place. We seek to understand how technology innovations are incorporated – or not – not in and of themselves, but as part of a dynamic household media ecology shaped by issues such as complexity, accumulation, functionality, interoperability and management.

Methods

This paper is based on research findings from a study of household broadband adoption and non-adoption during the early rollout stages of the Australian National Broadband Network (NBN) (Nansen et al., 2013).

To investigate household broadband adoption, we visited 2600 homes in the early release site of Brunswick, Victoria. We surveyed 282 households in late 2011, including homes with an NBN connection and those without, and conducted follow-up interviews (based on a purposive sample of various internet connection types) and surveying of a smaller subset of these households.

Background

Over 80% of Australian households now have internet access, with over 90% of these connections via broadband (ABS, 2012; Ewing and Thomas, 2012).

These metrics (internet, broadband, no internet) offer a starting point for analysis, yet inattention to both the variability and interdependency of internet infrastructures within the sociotechnical contexts of households disregards the ways technologies complicate patterns of adoption and non-adoption. Households have differing internet options available to them (e.g. dial-up, DSL/ADSL, fibre-optic, cable, satellite, wireless broadband), some of which are beyond the household's control, and this complexity is compounded by the aggregation and interaction of the household ecology of hardware devices, internal connections, software, and of course the digital competency and interest of householders (Shepherd et al., 2007; Wilken et al., 2011).

Findings

The survey data (see Figure 1) revealed that NBN use and non-use involved a number of factors. These can be grouped into three categories, which show:

1. 36% of non-using households were not in a position to make a decision to adopt – due to lack of awareness (17%), service provider difficulties around contracts or plans (5%), lack of communication from NBN installers (6%), or because their landlord had not agreed to a household connection (8%).

2. 28% of non-users had made a decision to refuse to adopt – due to perceptions of increase cost associated with the NBN (17%), or satisfaction with their current internet (11%).

3. 28% of non-users were in the process of adopting the NBN – 13% of respondents had the NBN equipment installed but not activated with a service provider yet, while a further 15% were in the process of organizing a service with an internet provider but this was delayed.

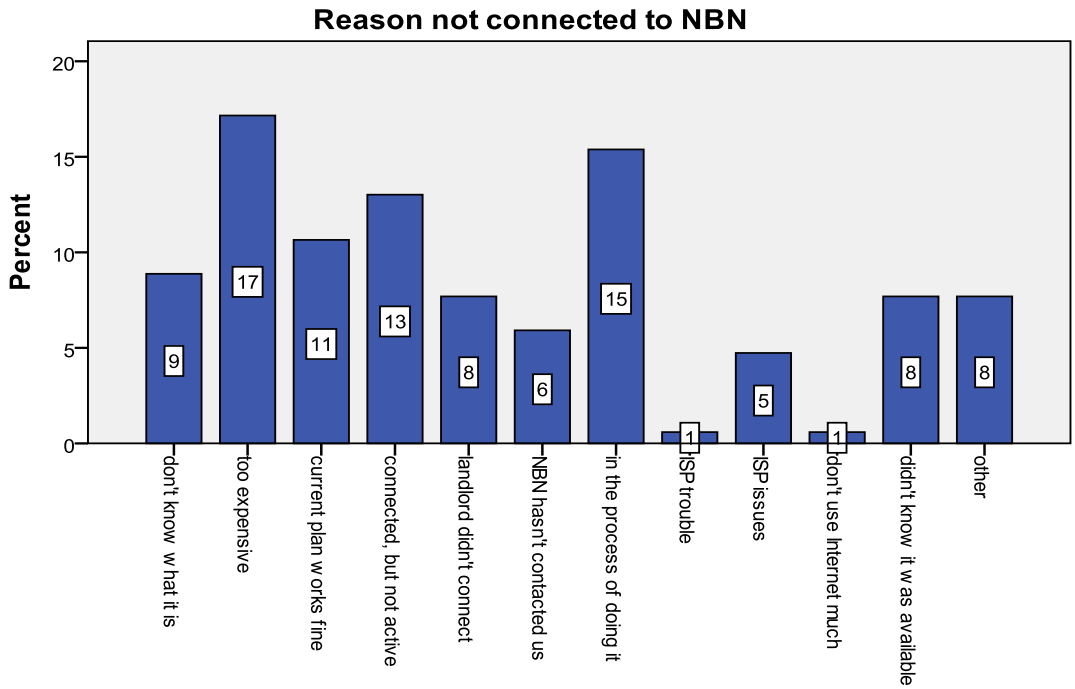

Figure 1: Reason for non-adoption of high-speed broadband

The quantitative data suggests that a range of external factors mediate and shape use and non-use within household decision-making, whilst the qualitative data below helps to unpack some of these factors.

Discussion

Brunswick residents were among the first to confront a new set of decisions, dealing with unfamiliar broadband technology, and an installation process that was still in an early stage of development. Yet, issues of broadband literacy, uncertainty in decision-making within a complicated environment of internet service provision, and difficulties integrating new technologies into the existing household media ecology are common difficulties, and were evident in our discussions with households. These findings revealed that use and non-use of the NBN does not occur in isolation, and must be considered as part of an aggregation of household media and technologies, their provision and management, and their understanding within the wider media infrastructure.

Refusal to adopt the NBN was often a decision about arrangements of complementarity or substitution within the household and wider media ecology, based upon the affordances of different forms of broadband internet: *"My wife and I have moved to wireless broadband, we each have one, on different accounts ... it offers us flexibility because we just moved house, and if we used the hard-wired broadband it would be hard for us to connect and disconnect the service if we move."*

Reluctance to adopt the NBN was often explained by an absence of information, including but not restricted to the NBN, extending across the ecologies of technologies and services: *"It's always complicated; I don't know why it is that telecommunication companies make their products incomprehensible."*

In the face of complexity, the reluctance of many households seemed to be a decision not to decide: *"I couldn't be bothered changing everything around because then you have to get new modems and all that sort of stuff..."*

Resigned adoption of high-speed broadband often emerged as a response to the inevitability of technical innovation, albeit underutilized: *"I probably have enough computing power on my computer to design the space shuttle and I use it 90% of the time as a word processing machine. And the speed of the internet I could probably do something extraordinary but I won't use it…"*

Further, NBN adoption did not conclude with activation but often required ongoing forms of **regulation** to manage issues of installation, integration and interoperability with the existing household equipment: *"We had very poor signal coming from the Wifi so they had to install a signal amplifier, a boost to the Wifi. We had a Wifi before but they gave us a new modem…"*

Finally, adoption of new technologies is also associated with disuse and problems of **redundancy**: "*I've got boxes down there of cables and leads and ports and every other little bit that I've bought over the years to get rid of."*

Conclusion

The introduction of the NBN is occurring in an environment in which the accumulation of new devices and services is often accepted as part and parcel of contemporary living, and in which short life cycles, quick turn-over and high redundancy rates would appear to be a digital industry standard. In these contexts, non-adoption needs to be considered less within a dichotomy of use and non-use, and instead as part of an increasingly differentiated landscape of engagement in which limited, partial and legacy uses of digital media and the internet abound. The decision to use or not may be an expression of individual choice, yet it is also shaped by complicated ecologies of digital infrastructures, devices, services and knowledge.

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Mum. Dad. Do you need some help with that? Empowering older Australians in a digital era.

Scott Rickard
University of Canberra
Australia
scott.rickard@canberra.edu.au

Abstract

The change to a digital environment for Australian families is more than simply adopting internet connectivity or a mobile phone. Moving from an analog environment and into a digital sphere for many individuals is confronting: the transition requires digital media literacy, that is an understanding of devices, forms of connectivity, installation of devices and how best to use digital connectivity to connect with other family members. In this Australian study the interviewees revealed that tensions occur between middle and older adults as both generations try to understand the effect of the change to a digital environment on each other and navigate the best path that enables communication and connection between family members. This paper will primarily draw on the interviews held with middle adult John and his mother Vera[1].

Keywords

Older adults; digital media literacy; families

Methodology

The adoption and practice of digital communication technologies of two generations, youth and elderly has been the subject of much international research (Lim and Tan, 2003; Lally, 2002; Ling, 2004; Wong, 2006). However, there is a hidden group of consumers in the 'gap', the middle adults. The middle adults who as individuals and in their roles as parents to some, and children to others have distinctly different needs from the individualized groups of youth and elderly. For this group, digital technology, and their uses for it seem much more mundane but are in fact integral to the family unit as they form the pivot point between generations.

The larger study offers a unique insight into intra-generational digital communication between family members, and specifically middle adults and their older adult parents. A few communication studies are framed using nuclear families with parents and children (Canon and Caronia, 2001; Green, Holloway and Quin, 2004; Lally, 2002; Lim and Tan, 2003), however the majority of studies use parts of a family such as intergenerational generations like grandparents and grandchildren or a single familial generation such as the elderly (Haddon, 2000; Ling, 2007; Wong 2006). Sometimes studies are framed around a particular gender and their adoption of technology (Dare, 2008; Dobashi, 2005; Gray, 1995; Rose 2004). Another common framework is to investigate aspects of family communication as part of a larger investigation on cultural practices such as the Nordic region of Europe (Kaare et al., 2007). This study is unique in that it investigates families from a familial generational position such as youth, middle adult and older adult recognizing that within families there are distinct familial responsibilities and expectations placed on each generation.

The focus of this paper is the tensions that arise between the middle adults (who were the largest respondent group in the study) and their older adult parents in relation to technology adoption and practice. The explosion of multiple internet devices within homes places greater emphasis on the need for individuals to be digitally literate in order to be socially included. In 2010 a study revealed that over 50% of all Melbourne homes use four internet enabled devices (Thom, 2010, para 3). The data for this paper comes from 11 face-to-face interviews with middle and older adults from 8 families. The interviews were in-depth and unstructured with a focus on understanding the broader study question of

[1] All participant names have been changed and pseudonyms used for reasons of privacy.

how the generations of family 'youth', 'middle' and 'older adult' communicate with each other using digital communication technologies.

Results and Discussion

During their interviews the middle adults offered their reflections of their older adult parents use of digital communication technologies. These can be categorized into disinterest, resistance and lack of conceptual understanding. Older adults expressing a disinterest or resistance to technology is well documented (Haddon, 2000; Palmer, 2011; Wong, 2006; Wyatt, 2003). This paper focuses on the third barrier identified in this study a lack of conceptual understanding. Unlike disinterest or resistance, a lack of conceptual understanding is not tied with the older adults inability to use the device but rather the inability to recall or learn new features because they fail to understand the basic premise on which the communication technology works. For these older adults it causes confusion and they often self-deprecate their abilities with the device and its applications.

In this study older adult and part time worker Vera indicates in her interview that she fails to understand digital technologies and demonstrates a lack of understanding in her everyday practice. While her son John can explain to her about how a particular device works and indeed write instructions when needed, Vera often fails to comprehend how things correlate, even if it may be a similar task that she completes daily. Therefore when something goes wrong, Vera gives up hope as she has a complete lack of understanding about the device and how it works. This can sometime create tension between her and John as he works hard to help her understand technology. John assists his mother with computer software, her entertainment system at home, her personal laptop and the setting up of her wireless connection at home. John demonstrates empathy for Vera and it motivates him to assist. He considers her lack of skill within context,

> "My mum learnt how to write shorthand, which is a lost art these days ... I would contrast me trying to me trying to learn shorthand is like my mum trying to understand computer technology. I don't understand shorthand at all … it's the same that I could be taught a squiggle is an F, but I wouldn't understand why and how she got the squiggle to be an F. It's the same with computers to her".

The tension discussed above between Vera and John is common between the middle adults and their older adult parents in this study. However rather than holding a negative perspective in the main the middle adults in this study supported their older adult parents lack of conceptual understanding through empowerment. Empowering older adults in this study involved providing access as well as supporting education. Different approaches were taken by the participants to teach their parents how to use technology. Some participants provided written instructions and guidelines (John for Vera), while Simon encouraged his father to enroll in short courses. Having themselves taken advantage of peer based learning some of the middle adults (Simon, Andrea and Beth) encouraged their parents to do the same. Peer based learning for older adults is acknowledged as one of the most effective teaching methods (Palmer, 2011).

Conclusion

The tensions that arose between the middle adults and their older adult parents in this study resulted in proactive measures on the part of the middle adults. Keen to get their parents using digital communication technologies it can be argued that they found positive methods of engaging their parents in technology by assisting with adoption and fostering empowerment through peer based learning where possible. Some middle adults also demonstrated empathy with their parents as can be seen in John's statement about Vera's shorthand skills. This empathy also encouraged John to see past his mother's inability to understand technology and to assist where possible with instructions and 'How to' graphics when she asked for help.

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Digitally disengaged: Government resistance to civic participation

Julie Freeman
University of Canberra
Australia
Julie.Freeman@canberra.edu.au

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]

[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).*[3]
>
> *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.

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[3] Minor typographical errors in citizens' comments have been corrected to aid readability.

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