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The digital façade in practice: local government and digital public participation

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Abstract

This paper follows Robert P. Mahoney and Chris Corbin's at last year's AGI (2000) but with empirical evidence surrounding the issues of "Information Age Government". It discusses the ways in which local authorities across the UK have been engaging in online citizen participation in a number of policy areas. It also examines some of the assumptions, "hype" and issues surrounding public participation via the "digital façade" of websites and e-mail, in these early days of e-government.

Following a survey and classification of local government websites, three "participatory" examples were selected for further examination. Interviews were carried out with officers and participants, with an aim to discover what notions of participation existed in digital contexts and what contribution the technology appeared to have. Views of "access", publicity and that public participation can be seen differently by those involved have impacted on the ways that technology has developed and what citizens believe they are engaging in. Many of these findings have important applications to public participation in practice, including the GI community, with growing examples of GIS for online citizen interaction.

1.1 Introduction

Much has been made of Information and Communication Technology's (ICT's) potential to enhance local democratic activity. Policy initiatives at the European and UK level have been set in place to develop information-based economies but these have also contained democratic components. This paper outlines developments in these areas since Mahoney and Corbin's (2000) discussion but it also questions some of the "hype" occurring in "digital participation": the application of ICTs to public participation in UK local government. The focus of this work is citizen engagement in online deliberative participatory democracy, a formal way of describing public participation that involves debate and the ability to express an opinion through digital means, and not just online voting. This paper describes the extent to which activities have been developing, the notions of participation that exist between online "actors" (officers and citizens) and the contribution that ICTs appear to have. Commentators assume that the Internet will provide the means to re-invigorate citizenship, increasing public participation (Sandvig, 1995), and that it will change representative democracy to involve direct decision-making by citizens (Macpherson, 1999). It is "hype" such as this that the research has examined.

This paper is based on empirical (Economic and Social Research Council funded) research from a PhD examining recent local authority activity across the UK. Although not discussed here, it is important to note that the approach has involved social theories from political science, planning and the social construction of technology. These have framed the questions that lead to the paper's content including a survey and typology of participatory websites (see 3.1), the experience of "actors" in leading examples across the UK (see 4.1 and 5.1) and conclusions and recommendations for practitioners (6.1). The findings are also important for the GI community as interest grows in applying web-based GIS for citizen interaction (see for example Kingston *et al.* (2000), which will depend on understanding the relationships between officers and citizens in digital contexts.

2.1 The Policy Context of Digital Participation

Although Mahony and Corbin (2000) have provided a good description of policies that impact on electronic government, and "g-government" in particular, it is useful to reiterate some and introduce others. At the European level there has been an interest in the "Information Society", policies which aim to develop globally-competitive information-based markets for member states. A component of this has involved activities that promote modern communication technology as a means to enhance democracy and decision-making. For example, the eEurope Action Plan impacts on ideas at this policy level, including viewing the availability of (public) information as a "consumer right" (European Commission, 2001). Although this research has not focussed on access to information *per se*, parallels can be drawn between it and digital participation, as information and "access" are a prerequisite for "good" democracy.

At the UK level much activity has occurred in terms of "Information Age Government", an initiative that aims to have most government services deliverable through modern communication technologies by 2005. Recently the former DETR [1] invited local authorities to become "pathfinders" for this initiative and introduced a budget of £25 million until 2002. In total, 25 projects involving 105 local authorities will pilot this activity (DETR, 2001a, 2001b) [2]. Examples include out-of-hours access to local services through PC, digital TV and mobile phone formats and the provision of free Internet access and e-mail in local libraries (DETR, 2001a). Over the next three years a proposed further £325 million will be made available to all local authorities. Simultaneously, the government's Invest to Save Budget will provide £22.4 million for 46 projects including offering citizens "...greater access to e-government services and council information" via the web (DETR, 2001c). These budgets and activities reflect the emphasis that Westminster is placing on digital government/citizen interaction at local levels, alongside their own attempts and activities in the devolved areas, for example the Scottish Executive's (2001) "Digital Scotland". Given this policy context, this research has been looking at recent examples of digital participation.

3.1 Examining the Digital Façade: Classifying Local Authority Websites

A survey covering 78% of UK local authority websites took place in the Spring of 1999 serving two purposes: (1) to examine the extent to which local authorities had been using Internet-based technologies for public participation and (2) to aid the selection of cases for further research (through officer interviews). Findings sit alongside similar work at the time (see MAPIT, 1999) but the survey focussed on how websites contribute to participation in planning, governance and environmental, or community, initiatives. In order to classify their participatory nature Arnstein's (1969) model was used as a basis (see Fig 1: A Ladder of Citizen Participation).
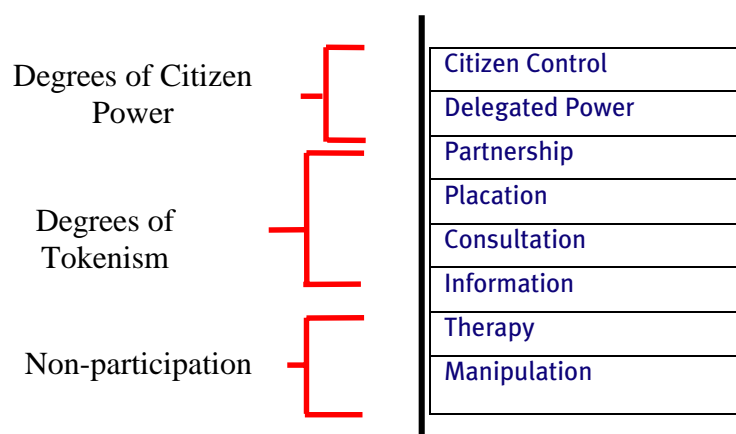

Fig. 1: A Ladder of Citizen Participation

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[1] (Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions now Department for Transport Local Government and the Regions)
[2] (140 projects involving 220 councils responded).

A typology was developed from this model ranging from poor websites to information providers and those that were more consultative. This was similar to one used to classify pan-European activity (Aurigi, 1998; Aurigi and Graham, 2000), although Aurigi's work was only discovered recently (Aurigi, 2001, *pers. comm.*). The distribution of websites can be seen below (see Graph 1: Level of Information on Websites).
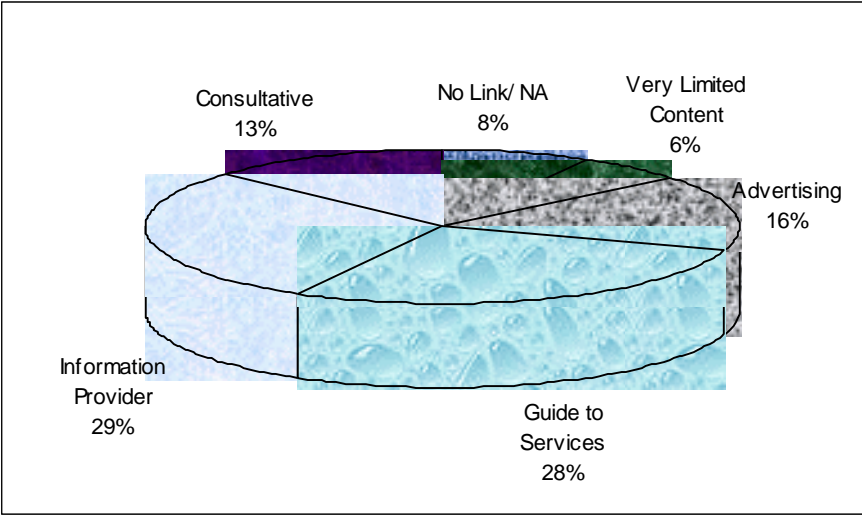
Graph 1: Level of Information on Websites

Some websites on the list could not be linked to or contained material so irrelevant that they could not be classified. This included examples where passwords prevented the public from obtaining information and no scope for participation. Typically, those websites which were "very limited" in their content were either under development or had very limited contact details, with some not updated since they were created over two years ago. The next category involved websites that "advertised" their area. These involved economic development and tourism as major features with little other content, Northern Ireland websites provided good examples. Others focused solely on supporting education, and a-to-zs of services began to appear in this set, acting like electronic telephone directories- a minor aid to participation. The appearance of more information about the functions and services of the local authority was seen as the next division ("guide to services"). The a-to-zs were very common but, to a lesser extent, online maps also featured, reflecting the need to organise and navigate the larger, more complicated, portals and to allow citizens to find out who their councillor was by clicking maps of wards or putting in postcodes. This group included some of the London Boroughs, who provided information about one-stop-shops for citizen-users of housing services, but few noted that plans or consultation activity existed. The largest set were "information providers", websites that either lacked instructions for responding to consultations or more extensive information. A number of authorities noted that they had development plans, and gave comprehensive breakdowns of their contents, costs and locations where they could be viewed (libraries and offices etc.), but there were no other online facilities. They were not intended as means to elicit a direct citizen-response and they functioned as a support to traditional materials.

The most participative ("consultative") websites had good examples at all levels of local government and included activities such as:

- providing complete versions of documents online, either viewable on the website or in a downloadable format

- conducting online consultation exercises

- supplying tools for the public to comment on the information supplied, or

- a space on the website to allow local groups to voice their opinion.

County councils in the south east of England were notable in this category. However, some of the more developed activities could be found in smaller authorities, including English district councils and Scottish

unitary authorities. Importantly, from all these "top-down"/ government-developed websites few could be said to land on the top "rungs" of the ladder.

Several leading examples from this category were then chosen, from authorities across the UK, to look behind these "façades" and the extent to which citizens were using them. The discussions with officers from these authorities developed into three in-depth case studies.

4.1 Leading Cases and Public Use

The three cases came from different policy initiatives involving local, strategic and mixed activities:

- Rushcliffe Borough Council's interim local plan review consultation exercise (local);

- the City of Edinburgh Council's Community Plan Consultation Exercise (strategic); and

- the London Borough of Lewisham's approach to the "Dialogue Project" (mixed).

Rushcliffe

The council had used a leaflet and press releases to direct interested residents to an e-mail address and their website, which included an online feedback form, alongside more traditional (council-supplied) methods. The issues in the exercise included where new housing should be developed, relating to central government allocations. This stimulated a large overall response and the methods participants chose are given below (see Graph 2: Rushcliffe Responses).
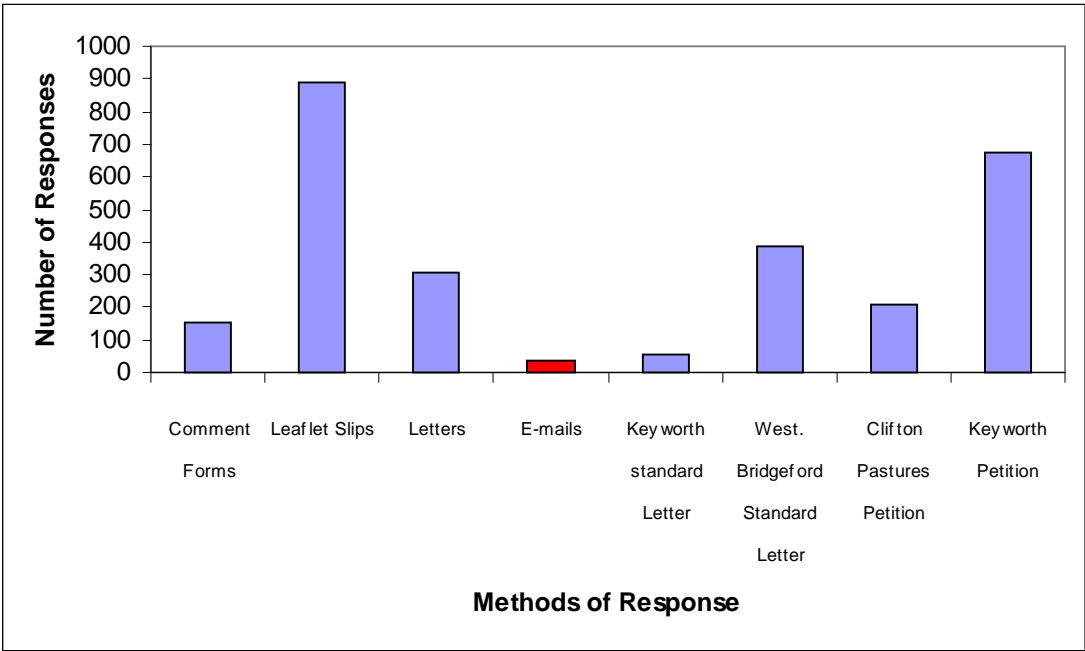
(*Source: Rushcliffe Borough Council, 1999*)

Graph 2: Rushcliffe Responses

There were clearly few responses via e-mail and residents had chosen to use other methods including their own letters, standard letters[3] and petitions. However, this was one of the leading examples from the survey and one where the most contributions had been received. The authority hoped that this interest would help with responses at the formal deposit stage of the plan.

Edinburgh

Edinburgh was one of five Scottish pilot authorities involved in community planning, a new strategic form of policy-making, where key local actors, citizens and the authority set out how they "envision" the future of

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[3] (ones written by residents' associations and sent to households)

their area, and not necessarily land-use. The Edinburgh approach involved the authority and the plan partners devising a consultation document for public scrutiny. Again, several methods were adopted including: online versions of all the consultation documents, a dedicated e-mail address, several meetings with business and voluntary groups, a call centre for people to telephone their responses and a survey of their citizens panel [4]. The distribution of the methods used is given below (see Graph 3: Edinburgh Responses).
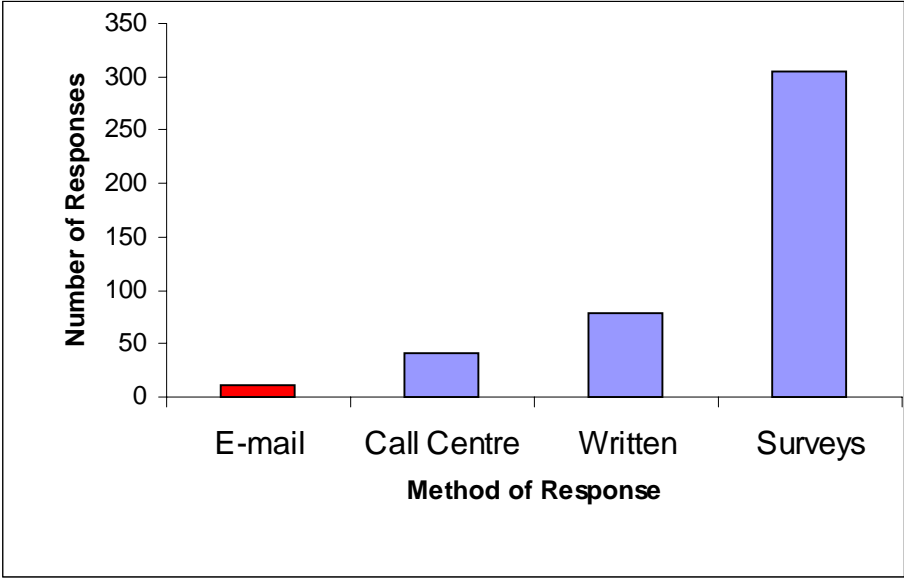
(*Source: City of Edinburgh Council, 1999*)

Graph 3: Edinburgh Responses

This example also shows that e-mail has not been favoured over letters and that actively seeking contributions (through the survey) has produced the largest amount of response. Since the consultation, Edinburgh has been developing Datashare, an information-sharing project that includes the community plan partners (see Lochhead, 2000), with some potential to allow citizens to access a web-based GIS, possibly aiding future community plan activity.

Lewisham

The Dialogue Project was a pan-European ISPO [5] initiative with partners in Ronneby (Sweden) and Bologna (Italy). It aimed to involve citizens who would not typically have Internet access in the "information society". For its component, Lewisham chose to involve some members of their citizens panel (around 60) in online debates to support councillor decision-making about strategic issues with direct local impacts. Participants discussed a variety of issues ranging from community safety to the future needs of the elderly in Lewisham. This was probably the best example of digital participation in this research, involving: consultant-facilitated chatrooms, e-mail, bulletin boards, as well as online resources from the authority and the wider Internet. They supplied some participants with computers, all received training, continued support and all telephone calls were paid by the project. The nature of this example means that responses are not a measure of activity but its evaluation recorded how useful participants found certain methods (see Graph 4: Lewisham Users Attitudes)

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[4] (a demographically representative group of (usually) 1,000 citizens)
[5] Information Society Project Office
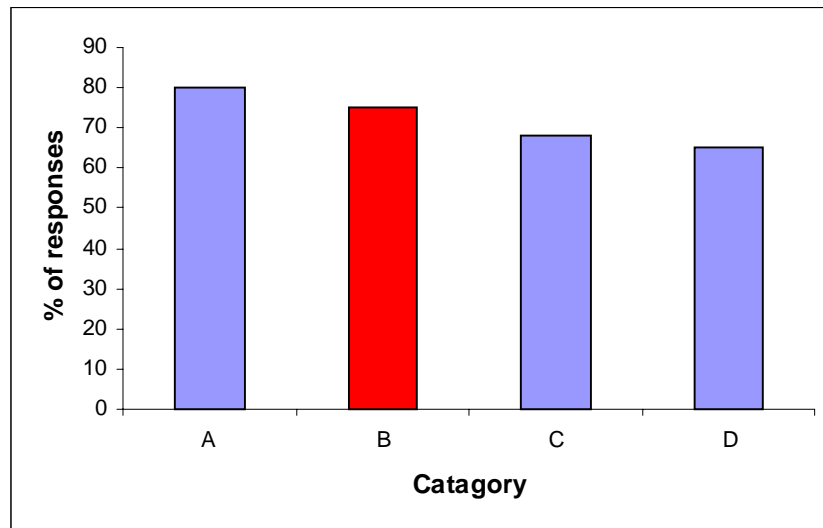
Graph 4: Lewisham Users Attitudes

Citizens had a slight preference for face-to-face contact (A) and e-mail (B) to the more involved, and technically difficult, tools such chatrooms (C) and bulletin-boards (D). The technology provided a forum for debate but it also allowed participants to make new friends and contact geographically distant family members. It proved that those not normally familiar with digital methods could participate and officers felt that contributions from the online panel did impact on a number of policies.

Within these leading cases, issues were discussed surrounding participants and officers' views of both the technology and participation. It is not possible to discuss all findings, particularly the theoretical aspects of this work, but some are important for the ways officers may wish to consider digital participation in practice.

5.1 Issues from the Digital Façade

This research has found that participation is not a linear process (it is assumed a problem is formed and methods are set in place to expose public opinion, thus solving the query). Findings suggest that, instead, it is a very complicated activity, both theoretically and in practice, with many benefits and problems. A few are mentioned here in terms of: access, the format of online information, the relationship to traditional media and notions of participation.

It has been found that online methods have provided some individuals with the ability to access the participation processes, any day and at any time ("twenty-four/seven"). Usage may reflect the convenience of online methods or a feeling of immediacy and direct communication through e-mail. Some participants suggested that the introduction of e-mail was the only reason they responded, even though they could have before. However, those who cannot engage with traditional methods, such as meetings, have also benefited, including carers, those with mobility problems or those who are intimidated or less able to communicate through older media forms. Technology offers them one avenue to interact with the authority and gain information where it may have been very difficult before.

Many approaches to online activity have involved digital replication of traditional consultation documents. Similarly, actors discussed the formal appearance of letters and the ephemeral/portable aspects of e-mails. There is a need to consider the format of online information for digital participation. Some officers believed that the content of websites would have to differ from traditional media's structure and that the more familiar tone in e-mails was useful for those responding, particularly if they are not used to the semi-judicial nature of planning processes. In some instances there were issues about the relationship between traditional and digital methods, with the publicity of online information relying on "offline" media. Rushcliffe's use of leaflets allowed them to focus on a certain audience and to publicise the e-mail address

and website domain, leading to more, although relatively low, contributions. It is wasteful to deliver information online and not make potential participants aware that it exists.

Importantly, the interviews showed that many citizens felt the process had been little more than a publicity exercise, that decisions had already been made, that they had not been listened to and that, at best, their role was to democratically validate policy-decisions. It should be remembered that these were leading examples, with many citizens interacting with officers or receiving close supervision, and that the authorities were genuinely trying to obtain public opinion to inform policy. It was found that these (and other) issues are underpinned by the way "public participation" is viewed and how different components of the process interact. The Diagram below illustrates these relationships in online environments (see Fig. 2: Components of Participation).
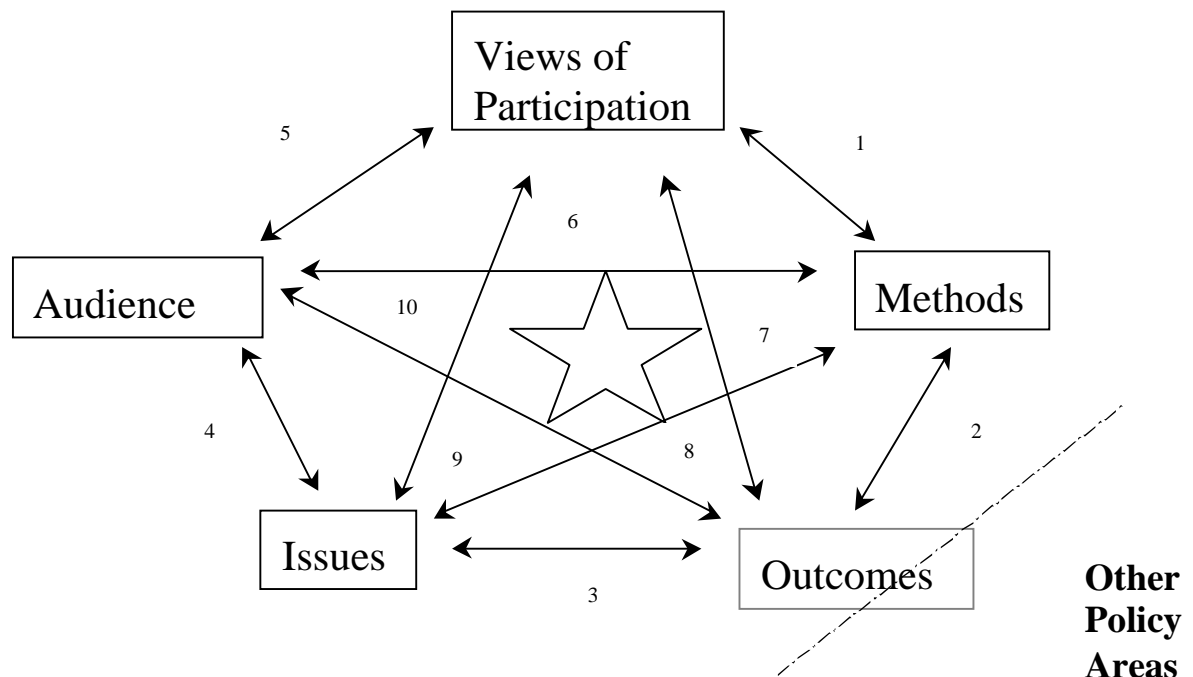

Fig. 2: Components of Participation

It is not possible to discuss each component fully but an indication is given here. *Views of Participation* include the democratic principles that underpin public participation in liberal democracies (as found in the UK). Examples include the need for equitable access, viewed as both social and physical "access": having the necessary social pre-requisites to use the technology and contribute effectively and the ability to gain access to the technology in an economic and actual sense (see Kling, 1999). *Methods* not only apply to digitally-based media but also the raft of approaches needed if an authority wishes to have a process that includes as many individuals as possible (see Alty and Darke, 1987). The *Audience* can be citizens (participants, non-participants, users and customers etc.) but there will also be those inside authorities who are interested in activities, and other organisations looking for examples of good practice. Some officers felt that an increase in participant numbers would mean sampling their contributions. Although this could be viewed as "representative" in a statistical sense it is not necessarily a democratic one and the "audiences" may not welcome this "lottery" of participation. *Issues* applies to the strategic/local/mixed nature of the policy that is under consultation. These can affect the way in which the process is viewed and the expectations of the exercise, with strategic policies typically performing less well than local issues (Thomas, 1996). It also applies to those issues that may be inappropriate for public participation, with Bristol's recent consultation on education budgets highlighting this issue (see Hetherington and Smithers, 2001a, 2001b). *Outcomes* involve the achievements and desires of an exercise, for example the ability to secure increased access, improving the numbers who contribute or reaching certain audiences. The outcomes of the exercise will have close relationships with the *Views of Participation* but the other components will also have an influence.

These components are both interrelated and co-dependent and demonstrate that the process is not linear. They are shaped by the way officers and citizens view them (often differently) and each needs to be understood and defined when attempting to undertake digital participation. Authorities need to understand their own notions of participation and how they are expressed through the other components. Issues have to be chosen that can be consulted upon, the audience needs to be related to the methods used (and several will be needed if the outcome of mass opinion is sought) and how these in turn shape, develop and curtail the original notions requires careful consideration. There is a need to be open about the process and manage the audiences' hopes and desires both within and outside an organisation.

6.1 Conclusions and recommendations

ICTs do not provide a technical fix for the problems of democracy and, if anything, this research has shown that digital participation is fraught with complexities. The benefits of its application, as sought through policy, have to be viewed alongside the need to support traditional media[6] and to understand the ways in which public participation has been constructed in this context. In many examples officers applied the technology as an afterthought, e-mail addresses were added to the end of documents and their format lacked the ".gov.uk" suffix. Minor issues such as these can dissuade digital citizens looking for twenty-four/seven access and those who are unable to participate through other media.

The Internet does not exist in a social vacuum, people's beliefs/choices are imbedded in developing technology and this social milieu is one that has many tenets built into it, as outlined in this paper. Sophisticated experiments, as in Lewisham, have shown that the technology can be used for activities other than consultation. Practitioners need to consider this social context when attempting to engage citizens online. To follow examples of "best practice" can outline some "pit-falls" but organisations should not expect others' approaches to be wholly appropriate for their circumstances. There is nothing revelatory in suggesting that "learning by doing" is useful but even small steps in this direction could prevent some of the disappointment felt by actors in the process, helping to deliver better understandings of democracy and a more socially "robust" information society.

In closing, what are the implications for Geographical Information Systems? This research has examined the mainly text-based media of e-mails and websites. There is great potential for plan-making and development control to link policy texts with online maps (and visa-versa) for participant annotation and for clarity. Online 3D (GIS-based) virtual environments could be used to support digital participation, as with the work of Kingston *et al.*(2000). Similarly, data-sharing projects (as in the Edinburgh example) can be useful for policy-makers and citizens alike. However, if GISs are to be employed in digital participation some attention will need to be paid to the above model (fig. 2) as methods of participation need to be viewed in the context of the other components and text will continue to play an important part in the decision-making process. What participatory GIS may involve, who it excludes, who participates and what it contributes will all need to be considered if "g-government" is to become a feature of deliberative digital participation.

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[6] (particularly as many of the most socially excluded do not have access to telephones, let alone the Internet)

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