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VIRTUAL NATION

The Internet in Australia

edited by Gerard Goggin

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Horizons of expectation

*Imaginary trajectories of electronic government*

Julian Thomas

The dominant academic and journalistic images of the Internet are of commercial, community or research-driven technologies. Government is often portrayed as an external force, either challenging or challenged by the Net. But what if we looked at the Internet as a technology of government?

Since the early 1990s, governments and international agencies around the world have devoted enormous resources to understanding, documenting and participating in the evolution of the Internet. New communications technologies are now seen as central not only to economic growth and cultural and social life but also to the modernisation of democratic practice and public administration. Yet the role of government in the wider history of the Internet remains marginal and little understood. This chapter is about one facet of that history: the way the Internet has gradually and unevenly begun to change Australian government itself, and how we can conceptualise that change.

Given Australia’s natural geography, small population and high takeup rates for new technologies, the benefits of networked public services for this country have long been particularly attractive; and over the past decade commonwealth, state and local governments have made significant, though not uniform, progress in using the Internet to make government information more widely available, to provide services and to enable citizens to engage more closely with government. The commonwealth agency responsible for electronic government claims that about 80 per cent of individuals...
and businesses with access to the Net are ‘predisposed’ to use online government services.\(^{1}\)

There is, however, surprisingly little independent analysis of what electronic government has achieved. Further, as in many areas involving new technologies, a host of potentially confusing terms surround the topic.

**Models of e-government**

Writers use expressions like e-government, digital government and online government interchangeably. All these terms convey the essential but utterly nebulous idea of transforming government through new information and communication technologies. So electronic government appears to encompass a bewildering variety of typical, but in many ways quite different, uses of new technologies – we’re familiar with the publication of government directories on the web, the posting of official reports as PDF files, the development of portals for specific users of government services (such as students or families), simple electronic services enabling people to renew drivers’ licences or change administrative details, business systems for electronic tendering, email lists enabling MPs to keep in touch with constituents. All these activities could be described as forms of electronic government, but they vary in intent and in utility. How can we begin to characterise and understand these variations?

A standard typology of electronic government distinguishes different kinds of services. The distribution of public information on the web is a form of **electronic publishing**; websites enabling citizens or businesses to do things (like pay bills) or deal with routine legal matters online are examples of transactional **electronic services**; communications between governments, politicians and citizens, enabling consultation and feedback in both directions, are forms of **electronic democracy**.

In some writing, this kind of taxonomy also works as an implied narrative, a set of developmental phases where different sorts of services are equated with increasing levels of sophistication and technical complexity. There is often a teleological assumption, that electronic government is inevitably or necessarily evolving from simple publishing to ever more integrated and elaborate systems.

Other writers have sought to look beyond services to the ideas behind them. Analysis at this level attempts to distinguish different models of electronic government. One cogent example is Andrew Chadwick and Christopher May’s account, which focuses on the implicit relationships between governments and citizens.\(^{2}\) For Chadwick and May, there are three models that matter: the **managerial**, the **consultative** and the **participatory**.
The managerial model is characterised by an emphasis on ‘efficient’ delivery of information from governments to citizens and other information users. Improving and extending control over information flows both within and outside government is the defining logic. In this model ‘opening up’ government is equated with speeding up the provision of information, and information flows between governments and citizens are seen as predominantly one-way. Spin and presentation are major considerations.

The consultative model, by contrast, is typified by agenda setting, extensive polling, a concern with representation and, sometimes, elaborate processes for consultation and participation. Here the idea of unmediated two-way communication between citizens and government is central, raising more complex questions of variable access and technical skill. In terms of information flow, there is an assumption that governments are the point of origin, developing policy ideas and then eliciting public opinion in order to improve them.

Finally, Chadwick and May identify a participatory model constructed around a stronger civil society, revitalised by the cooperative and voluntaristic ethos of the Net and protected by government, but autonomous. Information flows are ‘discursive and complex’; policy development is deliberative and pluralistic.

Chadwick and May present these models as Weberian ideal types. Perhaps not surprisingly, they find scant evidence of a consultative or participatory approach in US and European approaches to electronic government. There is a fairly sharp critical edge to their analysis – which leads inexorably to the conclusion that e-government is failing to realise its democratic potential.

Even so, their modelling can be compared with that developed by electronic government consultants – who are of course the strongest advocates of investment in this area. A characteristic consultant’s statement describes the hypothetical development of e-government as a shift from ‘transition to transformation’. The transition stage is the stage of adapting offline publishing and services to electronic networks. Transformation means the emergence of a ‘citizen-centric’ model of service provision, where the structures and institutions of government become as transparent, open and responsive as possible. The informational structure of government is somehow opened out to the citizen, who constructs a personal, individual and independent version of government purely for their own purposes.

But this model is also a critical one, because the project of rebuilding government around a consistent personalised information architecture continually fails in the face of the complexity of actually existing public administration. Contentious questions of cross-agency standards, coordination and
financial management are endemic; consultancy reports chronically bemoan the difficulties of achieving genuine whole-of-government change.

Three initial points are worth making about the current position.

First, there is a good deal of common ground among critics and proponents as to where e-government is going; to put it another way, there only appear to be a few ideas around about what e-government is for. For example, the Victorian government has recently announced a ‘second generation’ electronic government strategy aimed at ‘putting people at the centre’. Assuming that the era of concentrating on new electronic services is now over, the strategy aims to use network technologies to create new kinds of services; to give people more opportunities to engage in civic life and political discussion; and to create a framework for the continuing reform of government administration. While there are different emphases, this model has much in common with the language of citizen-centricity. While all this falls far short of the Chadwick and May participatory, community-driven model, it points in that direction, albeit in a characteristically Victorian state-directed way.

Second, as this example suggests, electronic government is not always a zero sum situation. The fact that most current instances are wholly or partly managerial need not preclude the future development of more far-reaching participatory systems – indeed some of what may be achieved in the managerial model may turn out to be necessary for the emergence of more democratic or communitarian systems.

There is more to the managerial model than first meets the eye. An emphasis on achieving efficiencies may appear pettifogging, but the benefits of reducing unnecessary bureaucracy should not be underestimated, regardless of what governments may choose to do with the savings. A similar point can be made about the tendency to see the publication of static data as an elementary first step for electronic government, unworthy of the Net’s great democratic promise. Again, the benefits of providing better public access to official documents are substantial, and such access directly contributes to political debate in democracies. Moreover, there is still considerable scope for improving the usability and accessibility of online documentation, and little to be gained from underestimating the complexity of Internet publishing.

A third aspect of the current situation that is worth noting is that the standard examples of electronic publishing, service delivery and e-democracy are generally on a small scale compared to the major expenditure and revenue activities of governments. To put it crudely, making it easier to get a dog licence is not all that important compared to the things people in government really worry about, such as paying for hospitals and managing education systems.
So why the fuss about electronic government? There is an underlying assumption that there is much more at stake, that e-government is about the future rather than the present. The Internet’s future impact on government is widely assumed, and vividly imagined, to extend much further than admin-istrivia or even a comprehensive digitisation of publishing technologies and service delivery. From inside and outside, critics and proponents share the expectation that the Net is the way to reshape government and transform civic life. The online future, from this point of view, offers a possible solution to that old and apparently intractable problem in liberal political thought, the double helix of spiralling bureaucratic complexity twinned with declining civic life.

This chapter asserts that the story of electronic government has become more complicated than the readily available narratives allow. E-government turns out to be resistant to the typologies of both democratic critics and e-business enthusiasts. Instead it appears to be driven by a multiplicity of competitive but sometimes incommensurable dynamics, emerging in turn from specific institutional and conceptual contexts.

The context of information policy
Some advocates of electronic government emphasise the speed and novelty of the digital revolution. But it is important to place governments’ adoption of new technologies within a broader context.

First, while technologies change, the objectives of governments evolve more slowly. Aims such as improving public access to information, standardising administrative systems and reorienting services around the needs of citizens are traditional liberal aspirations with long histories.

Second, the phenomenon of governments embracing communications technologies for social, commercial and national ends is not new. Between the world wars radio broadcasting was seen as a means to bring together the new Australian nation. The first electronic government services in Australia seem to have appeared in the early 1970s.

Third, technological change should not always be seen as an external force that acts on government from outside. Governments shape new technologies, and the ways in which new technologies are understood, through financial resources, administrative practices and policy objectives. They have adapted emerging information and communication technologies to meet diverse military, economic and social ends.

Further, because politics and the public sector are critical centres of public argument and debate, government is often one of the primary popularisers of the metaphors we use to describe and conceptualise complex technological
innovations – the ‘information superhighway’ and the ‘communications environment’ are examples.4

The idea of harnessing Australian government to the information economy was stimulated by the policy debates surrounding the Internet in the early and mid 1990s. At a time when ‘reinventing’ or ‘re-engineering’ government was a policy priority in Australia as elsewhere, new communications technologies came to be seen as the key to improving key government services, especially in health and education. At the same time, these technologies were also more generally being identified as major contributors to economic growth, improving productivity, opening markets, and generating new demand for skilled labour.

But if in the mid 1990s information policy was evolving into a new field of public administration, it was not a bureaucratic territory on its own. It cut across traditional departmental boundaries, reflecting the need for a new set of connections across government, between elements of industry, financial, communications and social policy, and the conviction that formerly unrelated objectives should be aligned at regional, national and international levels. Governments began to make strategic links between problems that were hitherto fragmented across traditional administrative boundaries. Policy makers attempted to address in a more coherent way issues such as data protection, intellectual property, electronic commerce and the ‘digital divide’.

In Australia, the commonwealth Department of Communications began to consolidate responsibility for information technology in the middle 1990s, drawing functions and expertise from other agencies such as the industry department and specialist research bureaux. Under John Howard’s Coalition government, the National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) was established within the portfolio of the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. NOIE was headed first by a former McKinsey consultant and Austrade executive, Paul Twomey, and later by a former head of Multimedia Victoria, John Rimmer. The agency acquired broad responsibilities for the commonwealth’s online initiatives, Internet policy and information industry issues. But the complexity of the area was demonstrated by continuing re-adjustments in the allocation of responsibilities between NOIE and the department. In 2004, much of NOIE’s broader policy and research program was absorbed into the department, and a new agency, the Australian Government Information Management Office, acquired primary responsibility for electronic government.

The manifold notion of the information economy, embodied in NOIE’s title, is a key to the expansive, aggregated nature of Australian information policy. In the US, where the idea gained currency, it was based on extensive
analysis and research. Together with the related idea of the ‘knowledge economy’, the concept is often traced back to Fritz Machlup’s pioneering post-war studies of innovation and research in the US. In the 1970s Marc Porat updated that work in a series of exhaustive studies of the information sector for the US Commerce Department. The contemporary descendants of Porat and Machlup include Berkeley economists Peter Lyman and Hal Varian, whose *How much information? 2003* project estimates information storage and flows in order to gauge the amount of new information generated each year. No comparable Australian research exists. In Australian bureaucratic practice the idea of ‘the information economy’ appears to have been an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to politically combine several related but not always connected sets of issues, and the public service terrain corresponding to them. It does not rest on any extensive local research into the information sector, and nor does it signify a coherent economically informed approach to information policy (see chapter 9).

It draws together, instead, a cluster of issues. Firstly, there is an industry, or business, agenda, the claim that governments should intervene to identify, sustain and extend electronic commerce. Australians’ adoption of online commerce lags behind European and North American experience. The theory is that the market power of government enables it to catalyse the wider economy, using its influence to provide ‘best practice’ examples and drive the adoption of new technologies, especially in the areas of encryption, information security and accessibility. These measures are aimed at building commercial trust in new electronic forms of communication and exchange. Without confidence and security, the benefits of electronic transactions will be limited to niche markets.

There is also an important civic dimension to the information economy. The growing ubiquity of information technologies in the daily lives of citizens has spurred governments to develop policies aimed at fostering greater community participation in decision-making. In its December 1998 *Strategic framework for the information economy*, the Australian government made a commitment to provide all Australians with open and equitable access to information available online as a way of securing ‘a strong democratic, informed and inclusive society’, and to avoid a social polarisation between the so-called ‘information rich’ and ‘information poor’.

This recognition of what has become widely known as the digital divide points to the social dimensions of the information economy. Over a decade the Internet has evolved rapidly from a rarefied network for the technologically inclined to an everyday communications medium. Over half of Australian households are now connected to the Net, yet there are likely to remain substantial sections of the community which will be much slower to connect, whether for economic, cultural or other reasons. Many people may simply
not want to use it. From the point of view of governments planning electronic services, it is vital that as many people as possible not only ‘have access’ to the Net in one way or another, but actually are using it. For those considering more challenging innovations in electronic democracy, this issue is even more critical.

For the public sector, the social, civic and business policy objectives overlap and coexist. The connections and disconnections between them are now in sharper focus, as the advocates of electronic government have begun to emphasise a more radical transition to a ‘mature’ model of e-government, extending well beyond earlier aspirations.

The advocates’ case

Arguments such as these reappear throughout the e-government literature, both in Australia and overseas. We can assume that they do have some traction within government, especially, perhaps, the ‘tyranny of distance’ and efficiency claims.

There are undoubtedly other reasons for the launching of ambitious electronic government programs. Governments wishing to appear business-friendly are likely to emphasise and invest in better e-commerce systems for suppliers. The Internet also enables government to promote itself directly to the broader public and to targeted groups, bypassing or supplementing traditional media channels. Other factors may be important in other jurisdictions. In Queensland, for example, where there is a greater emphasis placed on the benefits of electronic democracy than appears the case at a federal level, online services are presented as enhancing civic participation by enabling governments and citizens to communicate more directly. The advocates of this transition are specialist agencies, the numerous consultants who work in the field, and internal executives such as the private sector style ‘chief information officers’ now de rigueur in many larger agencies. Consultancy firms occupy a central strategic position, as a source of expertise and as reviewers of e-government ‘progress’. They draft policy documents, evaluate programs, and release reports benchmarking different governments’ performance. Symbolic policy statements and ambitious timetables for change emerge from the dedicated agencies or central departments; line agencies are then placed in the position of demonstrating performance according to these targets.

It is easy to oversimplify the debates within government over the direction and pace of change. There are clearly many claims, sometimes conflicting, as to what electronic government should do. A recent speech by John Rimmer, for example, includes the claim that convenient commercial online
services have created an expectation that government should provide similar innovations; the claim that information should be accessible on demand; the claim that services should be accessible in regional, rural, and even remote parts of the country; that material should be tailored for the needs of the individual user; that costs should be reduced for both users and government; that there should be single points of contact with government; and that citizens should not need to know how government is organised in order find the right information.

Many of these claims and arguments overlap in practice. Some of them embody a broader public service reform agenda, such as that of 'joined-up government'; some of them diverge from conventional characterisations of microeconomic reform. They may also conflict with each other. The goal of enhancing opportunities for civic participation is unlikely to coincide with providing the most economical online service. Promoting the role of ministers, or heads of government, may not always be conducive to making online government as easy as possible for citizens to access and navigate. The way in which different governments present themselves online says a lot about what they think electronic government is all about.

Plainly John Rimmer's arguments call for much more than simple online directories and downloadable reports on static sites. The advocates of electronic government often assume that users’ expectations will continue to grow and that electronic services must become ever more integrated and seamless. Meanwhile, the challenges from the earlier era of information policy are still there: how to achieve change across the complex existing architecture of public administration over different levels of government; how to incorporate a social and cultural agenda into technology planning; and how to make the connections between broad policy aspirations and actually achievable improvements in public service. And while the call for more ambitious services rings out, there is little evidence of detailed usability testing of existing sites, serious research into what citizens’ expectations really are, or thorough public evaluation of the return on the substantial funds spent to date.

E-government in Australia: recent experience

The recent history of electronic government around the world has been characterised by expansive programs aimed at ‘taking government online’ – the ‘transition’ stage in the language of consultants. In December 1997 the commonwealth government committed itself to deliver all ‘appropriate’ services over the Internet by the end of 2001, complementing but not replacing existing services. The government claims to have met this target, although
the meaning of ‘appropriate’ in this context seems certain to remain obscure. A number of state governments have made similar commitments and claims. Much of what has been done to date involves the online publication of static data; there are also a large number of federal and state government services available on the Internet. In New South Wales alone, over 900 separate services are now said to be available online. Examples of commonwealth and state online services include access to birth, death and marriage certificates; lodgement of statements with the Australian Taxation Office; archival searching of major public collections; and moderated guides to health problems. Alongside these and many other online services, a new generation of portals or ‘channels’ have been developed at the whole-of-government level. These are supposed to be designed around the needs of specific groups of users, rather than simply providing an online presence for an agency.

Most of what has been done so far would be described as ‘managerial’ e-government, according to the Chapman and May terminology. Most of it could also be described as non-transactional electronic publishing, apparently driven by the simple aim of making useful information accessible. NOIE argued that the next phase will involve more closely integrating services across government agencies, improving financial management and budget processes, and developing a more strategic, whole-of-government approach. But achieving ambitious and necessarily arbitrary policy goals in this field is notoriously difficult. Users’ actual needs are rarely researched in detail; usability testing is patchy; uncertainty over future technologies prevails; financial planning systems are not designed for these kinds of initiatives; costs and benefits are not spread evenly; skilled personnel are scarce; and networked information systems are not easy for the non-technically trained to understand. Practitioners speak of the intractable difficulties of working across traditional agency boundaries, securing the necessary resources, attempting to establish standard processes and approaches, and tailoring information for the people who need it.

An obvious further problem with global targets such as those in *Investing for growth* is that they do not necessarily lead to strategic priority setting. Agencies learn that the so-called policy is really a regulatory game, where the rational strategy is to concentrate on producing the right signals which indicate that targets are being met, rather than achieving the best longer term outcomes.

Usability issues remain critical. Even the supposedly simple business of finding and reading documents online remains unnecessarily complex for many users. Governments have embraced proprietary document formats such as Adobe’s PDF and Microsoft’s PowerPoint, and now use them apparently indiscriminately. Accessing even simple documents often means downloading large and hard-to-navigate PDFs, which are in many cases designed
and laid out as if they were traditional printed reports, making them unsuitable for either on-screen browsing or low-end printing. ‘Solving’ the problem by breaking up large PDFs into a series of smaller files makes things worse. So-called ‘tagged’ or ‘accessible’ documents, which are easier to read using adaptive technologies, are rarely available on Australian government websites.¹⁰

Many government sites remain incoherent, pulled and pushed by the conflicting imperatives of providing useful information while at the same time spinning a policy or highlighting a minister. At the time of writing, the home page of the commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services is organised around North Korean-style proclamations: ‘Families Are Strong’, ‘Communities Are Strong’ and ‘Individuals Reach Their Potential’. Between these slogans are links to the programs that presumably would not exist were these statements true.¹¹ A New South Wales auditor-general’s report on the usability of government websites found that a lack of clarity as to the purpose and audience of a site was one of several common factors making many government sites frustrating and difficult to use. Other factors included inadequacies in online searching and help, failures to provide access for people with a disability, and a lack of translated material for people who do not speak English. Information about privacy, security and other legal matters was also often incomplete or hard to find.¹²

There has been only sporadic public evaluation of Australian electronic government programmes. NOIE reported on activity at a commonwealth level, but of course it was not an independent observer. Using the same consultants, both NOIE and Multimedia Victoria have produced reports on the benefits of their government online programs.¹³ The results of reports such as these are sketchy and invariably mixed. There is evidence that online services are evolving as user demands change. In Victoria, according to recent surveys, citizens express a high level of satisfaction with some sites. There is evidence also that governments are responding, however slowly, to known problems. While we can gauge the degree to which government agencies have complied with whole-of-government targets, evaluating the usefulness of their efforts largely remains a task for the future.

New South Wales provides a rare case where there has been more rigorous analysis of the experience to date. The New South Wales government has developed online services vigorously since the release of *connect.nsw: an Internet strategy for NSW* in 1997. Like similar strategies elsewhere, *connect.nsw* involved linked plans for electronic service delivery, new government portals and new agency websites. It aimed to establish common infrastructure for delivering government services and sharing
information within and between agencies across the three tiers of government. Electronic commerce initiatives, including the development of a legal and regulatory framework, were included in connect.nsw in order to stimulate economic activity in the state. Finally, connect.nsw supported the development of networked communities; to enhance the quality of life of people living in New South Wales by networking within and across communities, especially those isolated by distance or social dislocation.

The New South Wales auditor-general published a review of electronic government in that state in September 2001. This review is perhaps the most detailed and informative study of electronic government in Australia to date. The review found that:

…it is not apparent that the Government’s vision can be fully achieved without increased efforts. For example, in setting [electronic service delivery] targets some agencies may have selected services which could quickly be put online, as opposed to those which might generate most overall benefit. But of even more significance, much of the value from e-government lies in reform of administrative processes within and between agencies – often called ‘cutting red tape’ and ‘breaking down the silos’. Action here is more limited.¹⁴

The auditor-general indicated that, in the case of New South Wales, there were a number of key issues requiring urgent attention. According to the review, stronger mechanisms were needed to monitor, review and report publicly on progress and benefits, there had to be more emphasis on central coordination, and projects need more rigorous and systematic risk management. Line agencies need more help. Furthermore, funding was not well synchronised with policy aspiration – agencies had few resources to trial new technologies, and therefore were unlikely to take any risks or do anything adventurous.

In broad terms the auditor-general’s recommendations, if implemented, would have the effect of increasing central control over information flows rather than dispersing it. Although the auditor-general expressed some sympathy for line agencies responding to arbitrary deadlines and targets, the effect of his comments would be greater coordination and standardisation, and less autonomy at an agency level. In Chadwick and May’s terms, the problem here is a system which is not managerial enough. But the auditor-general’s comments also target sites shaped by ‘spin’, pointing to their lack of coherence or consistency with the broad directions of information policy.
Conclusion

The New South Wales report emphasises both the difficulties of the online transition and the benefits of accessible government, and suggests that achieving the objectives of the 1997 strategy is likely to be a protracted process. Given the similarities between the New South Wales strategy and those elsewhere, these comments probably apply in some degree to other governments in Australia and overseas. If there is a lesson from the experience so far, it may be that putatively rudimentary or preliminary steps in electronic government can turn out to be harder than anyone expected. It follows that the conventional developmental trajectories, and the taxonomies that go with them, must be reconsidered.

It might be helpful to stop seeing electronic government initiatives as failed democratic revolutions or unrealised plans for new systems of government, and to undertake further independent, if low-key, examinations, of the kind done by the New South Wales auditor-general, into what sorts of online services are actually useful tools for doing things.

However, while much of the promise in the first phase of e-government has yet to be realised, governments are already moving on. Victoria’s new strategy of ‘putting people at the centre’ is a case in point. The communitarian vision of the Net remains an energising, if elusive, force for governments as much as anyone. The transformative, idealist language of electronic government-as-it-will-be always sounds more interesting than the dreary business of improving efficiency and accessibility. It would be unfortunate if it diverted governments from more achievable goals.

In Australia as elsewhere, recent experience underlines the complexity of adapting government to the era of the Internet. There has been remarkable progress over the past decade in making government more accessible. But around the world there remains a vast mismatch between electronic government as it actually is and as it is vividly imagined. The advocates of electronic government – frequently external consultants, representatives of dedicated agencies, or executives outside line management – are often the objects of scepticism both within the bureaucracy and outside it. They are in the awkward and sometimes vulnerable position of being idealists, enthusiasts, or, worse, evangelists in ostensibly pragmatic administrative environments.

They are idealists in a philosophical sense, in that they seek a necessarily imaginary electronic ideal in the real. They do behave like evangelists, holding conferences and seminars where they attempt to convert colleagues through visionary rhetoric and exemplary tales. And they face great difficulty in finding practical ways to implement change along the trajectories they imagine. Change is happening, but the policy stakes are high, the budgets are large, the language is ambitious – and, of course, the price of failure will be extravagant.
Further reading


National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) and DMR Consulting, E-government benefits study, Canberra, 2003.

Notes


8 NOIE, Better services, better government: the federal government’s e-government strategy, Canberra, 2002.
272 Virtual Nation


