CANADIAN DEMOCRACY HARD-WIRED?

Connecting Government and Citizens in the Digital Age

BY Graham Longford

TECHNOLOGY HAS LONG BEEN AT THE CENTRE OF MYTHOLOGIES OF NATION-BUILDING AND NATIONHOOD IN CANADA, FROM RAILROADS AND ELECTRICITY GRIDS TO CANDUS AND PUBLIC BROADCASTING. COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES, IN PARTICULAR, HAVE FEATURED PROMINENTLY IN WHAT MAURICE CHARLAND CALLS THE CANADIAN RHETORIC OF "TECHNOLOGICAL NATIONALISM," IN WHICH TECHNOLOGICAL PROWESS (THINK CPR, CBC AND HYDRO QUEBEC) SERVES AS BOTH SYMBOLIC SOURCE OF NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION AND PHYSICAL MEANS OF BINDING GEOGRAPHICALLY DISPERSED POPULATIONS TO THE NATION AND EACH OTHER.

The mid-nineties witnessed a surge in techno-nationalist rhetoric in Canada as excitement began to build about new information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet. Inspired by equal amounts of bravado and anxiety, the federal government launched a series of initiatives and policies designed to ensure Canada's presence on the so-called Information Highway and resist the centrifugal forces increasingly exerted on Canada by the globalization of production and culture. Best known of these, perhaps, is its Canada On-Line strategy, designed to ensure that Canadians have access to the Information Highway and to a steady stream of on-line Canadian content. One of the more recent manifestations of this policy agenda, the National Broadband Task Force (NBTF), examined the potential benefits of universal access to high-speed Internet service for all Canadians, and drew explicitly on the rhetoric of techno-nationalism. The Task Force's final report, released in June 2001, bore the title, *The New National Dream*, recalling the early days of the CPR. These and other policy making initiatives involving new ICTs are, along with their prospects for success, the subject of a number of the articles in this magazine.

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A recent set of initiatives which has received far less attention than more high profile projects like the broadband initiative is the federal government's own increasing use of digital technology to connect with citizens, otherwise known as *e-government*. In its 1999 Throne Speech, the federal government announced the Government On-Line (GOL) project, committing itself to offering citizens on-line access to all key government information and services by 2004. Consistent with other initiatives designed to strengthen Canadian nationhood through new ICTs, GOL is intended to "reinvent" government and the public service by making both more open, transparent and "citizen-centred," thereby revitalizing citizen-government relations and the practice of democracy in Canada. In the face of dramatic declines in voter turnout, political efficacy, and faith in government over the last decade or two, a phenomenon by no means unique to Canada, it is small wonder that the federal government has turned to new ICTs to attempt to stem this ebb tide of legitimacy. The question addressed in this article, however, is whether initiatives like GOL will succeed in renewing and reinvigorating citizen-government relations and the general quantity and quality of political participation in Canada.

While the federal government may pour as much as three to four billion dollars into GOL over the next few years, there is little research to support the more sanguine expectations for its impact on the character of citizen-government relations and democracy in Canada. In fact, some existing research on e-government, e-democracy and computer-mediated-communication (CMC) suggests that each confronts us with as many new challenges as they overcome old ones. Furthermore, the nature of citizen-government relations and the quality of Canadian democracy has as much to do with government policies and activities off-line. In this respect, federal government policies affecting service quality and democratic openness are contradictory at best. While rushing to put information and services on-line, I will argue, we have witnessed a host of *off-line* "denial of service attacks" on the part of the federal government in a variety of areas from health care to freedom of information. Such attacks, in my view, pose as great a threat to our sense of national belonging and citizenship. All the more reason, therefore, to step back from the recent hype about e-government in order to offer more sober reflections on the democratic promise and pitfalls of mediating citizen-government relations across the digital networks of cyberspace.

GOVERNMENT ON-LINE

The federal government launched its GOL initiative in 1999, with the goal of making the Government of Canada the most connected government in the world to its citizens, and to make on-line transactions the most common form of citizen-government interaction by 2004. In fact, while touted as heralding a revolutionary transformation in government and public administration, aggressive use of ICTs to reform service delivery was well under way in the decade prior to GOL, as a result of budgetary pressures, culminating in the replacement of 5,000 front-line public servants at Human Resources Development Canada with several thousand electronic self-serve kiosks in the mid-nineties. Since then, the use of new ICTs also been defended in terms of their ability to bring government and citizens closer together by increasing the accessibility and convenience of government information and services. E-government advocates expect that by placing more and more services on-line, enabling citizens to access them faster and more conveniently, governments can overcome the perceived "service deficit" plaguing the public sector. Furthermore, as digital

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technology lowers the "cost" of information acquisition, so the logic goes, citizens will be empowered to hold governments more accountable and to monitor and participate in political debate and decision making more effectively. Together, the benefits of e-government are portrayed as offering a powerful antidote to the civic malaise that has gripped countries like Canada over the last couple of decades, driving down voter turnout and other forms of political engagement.

On the face of it, the question of whether or not GOL can improve the quality of public services and significantly alter the informational balance of power between government and citizens demands an answer in the affirmative. Some recent figures are compelling. On the service side, the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency (CCRA) offers a service called Netfile, through which taxpayers can file income tax returns over the Internet. Already over one and a half million Canadians avail themselves of the service. The Canada Site, a federally-maintained Internet portal giving access to over 450 federal Web sites and hundreds of thousands of pages of information on government programs and services, received 468 million hits in 2000, an increase of 97% over the previous year. Individual departments have reported similar success. The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, for example, maintains a Trade Agreements and Negotiations Web site which received over one million hits per month in the weeks leading up to and following the Seattle meeting of the WTO. Even activists conceded that the site provided a useful resource. More recently, the federally-mandated Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada launched a Web site containing a variety of materials related to the Commission's work and public hearings. Since its initial launch in September 2001, the site has received as many as 1.5 million hits per month and has been visited by approximately 60,000 unique visitors monthly. These and other achievements help explain Canada's top ranking among twenty-two countries recently surveyed for the "maturity" of their e-government services. The questions remains, however, whether such measures will revitalize citizen-government relations and reinvigorate public debate in Canada. There has been no shortage of superlatives and hype attached to e-government. Therefore, I propose in this article to sound a note of caution, to suggest why e-government may fail to ignite a revolutionary transformation in citizen-government relations and the practice of democracy in Canada. There is reason to believe, in fact, that it may well exacerbate existing democratic public service deficits.

SERVICE DELIVERY: E-COMMERCE AND VIRTUAL PUBLIC SERVICE

E-government advocates argue that placing government services online will help close the "service gap" in the public sector by emulating the private sector model of customer service. By offering citizens access to faster, cheaper and more convenient service over the Internet, government can reinvent itself as "citizen-centred," thus perhaps reversing a decades-long decline in public satisfaction with and trust in the public service. While it is too soon to assess the impact of e-government initiatives on such attitudes, there is evidence of improved service delivery, at least of a kind.

When narrowly defined in terms of e-commerce criteria of service delivery, such as speed, convenience and reduced waiting and processing times, a number of federal e-government initiatives have been highly successful. At CCRA, for example, Netfile users receive their income tax refund in as little as two weeks from the date of filing, down from six to eight weeks under the old paper-based system. At HRDC, meanwhile, ICT-related enhancements to its service delivery network have cut waiting and processing times and reduced over and underpayments to benefit recipients. However, enthusiasm for e-government service delivery reform needs to be tempered with a recognition of the pitfalls associated with online service delivery, and of the many ways in which public services have declined over the last decade in substantive and qualitative terms.

Firstly, while touted as offering significant cost-savings through automation, major ICT projects in the public and private sector have a dismal record of delays, cost overruns and outright failure. On average, a mere 16 per cent are completed on time and on budget. The larger and more complex the project, the greater the likelihood of failure. Therefore, a few spectacular, expensive and well-publicized failures, such as the recent MFP software licensing scandal at the City of Toronto or the Anderson IT consulting mess at Ontario's Ministry of Community and Social Services, have the capacity to outweigh whatever gains accrue to the reputation of the public service as a result of incremental improvements in waiting times, for example.

Secondly, as e-government becomes a reality, the country's telecommunications infrastructure will become the new public service infrastructure, with millions of Canadians increasingly reliant upon it for government services, information, benefits and, eventually perhaps, education and health care. Herein lies the potential problem: the country's liberalized telecommunications market provides differential access to network connections and bandwidth across the system, with numerous poorly served areas and segments of the population. With one third of municipalities, mostly

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will emerge as governments go on-line. Superimpose other digital divides based on income, education and literacy and we have a recipe for the disenfranchisement of millions of "unplugged" citizens, many of whom tend to be more reliant on public services than fellow citizens with Internet access. The prospects for avoiding this danger were significantly diminished when the federal Liberals chose more or less to ignore the NBTF report's recommendations for a public-private partnership to ensure universal broadband access.

Finally, while initiatives in electronic service delivery may well have led to "e-commerce" type improvements in terms of convenience, waiting and processing times, there is no doubt that many of those who are dependent on public services offered by federal and provincial governments suffered a series of *off-line* "denial of service" attacks, so to speak, as a result of cutbacks and restructuring in the 1990s affecting everything from social assistance benefits to environmental monitoring. There appears to be a tension, here, between the rhetoric of e-government and the reality of restructuring in the public sector. HRDC provides a perfect example of this tension between the "citizen-centred" rhetoric of on-line service delivery and the reality of substantive cuts to many services off-line. While implementing major new technological enhancements to its service delivery network in the mid-nineties, the department introduced changes to the *Unemployment Insurance Act* in 1996 which tightened eligibility requirements and reduced the level and duration of benefits while simultaneous increasing premiums. So much for "citizen-centred" service!

Events at HRDC, and elsewhere, suggest that the e-commerce model of service delivery, and the implicit model of the "citizen-as-consumer" attached to it, is in the process of eclipsing the older model of citizenship in Canada, that based on substantive entitlements. Given the realities of the global economy, the federal government's embrace of the former is understandable. One wonders, however, about the long term consequences for citizen ties to government, and to each other, as this e-commerce model of citizenship becomes dominant. Recent events in Ontario, where public opinion has swung heavily against privatizing public utilities such as hydro and water treatment, are also suggestive, signaling perhaps the public's growing understanding of the limits of the e-commerce model. Restoring confidence in Canada's much-maligned public services, therefore, may require more than simply automating routine transactions such as renewing driver's licenses and hunting permits, to include a renewed emphasis on more qualitative and substantive dimensions like fairness, due process and the public interest.

GOVERNMENT ON-LINE AND THE PRACTICE OF DEMOCRACY

A second species of claims made on behalf of e-government concerns its potential impact on the quality of democracy in Canada. By putting government information on-line and offering additional on-line channels for communication between government and citizens, so the argument goes, government will become more open and transparent and citizens will be better equipped to hold government accountable and to contribute to policy deliberations and decision making. Again, however, while the statistics and examples with respect to government Web sites mentioned above are impressive, there may be less to the argument than at first appears. Along with some of the technical limitations associated with on-line information, we need to pay attention to potential off-line threats to the ecology of information in the public sphere.

TOO MUCH INFORMATION?

Firstly, there are serious technical challenges to the effective use of on-line information by citizens. Web search engines, for example, return far too many hits, often unfiltered and in random order. An unscientific but nonetheless revealing test of the Canada Site by this author demonstrates the problem. The following list shows the number of hits returned on key word searches for a number of current issues: climate

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change (29,000); free trade (58,000); and security (99,000). In other words, looking for government information on-line is not unlike searching the Library of Parliament without a catalogue, after a bomb has been detonated. Under the circumstances, where its utility to citizens is concerned, too much information combined with limited searchability is just as bad as no information at all. Granted, some attempts by the architects of GOL have been made to increase the user friendliness of the Canada Site. Here citizens are presented with numerous "service gateways" organized around various "life events" such as birth, edu-

cation, employment and unemployment, disability, and starting a business. By speeding users to existing services, however, this approach contains a built in bias towards the *status quo*. What it fails to address are the needs of citizens who are interested in evaluating, interrogating and contesting these same programs and services in terms of their *adequacy* or *effectiveness*. The degree of political sophistication and information literacy demanded of citizens seeking information related to the latter exceeds that of all but a minority of Canadian citizens at present.

The technical challenge of organizing, cataloguing and making more user-friendly the vast amounts of on-line government information suggests that the problem facing citizens is one of *too much information*. This is misleading, however. While improvements to the usability of on-line information are clearly needed, they will have a limited impact on the overall success of GOL from the citizen perspective because they fail to touch upon or alter the basic information dissemination philosophy and practices of the federal government off-line.

ENCLOSING THE INFORMATION COMMONS

Set against the larger backdrop of government information dissemination as a whole, which includes deeply entrenched habits of secrecy and cost recovery policies which discourage citizens from seeking information, the impact of GOL may be diminished. By saving us a trip to the library or government bookstore, GOL certainly makes accessing information more convenient, for those with Internet access, but it has not signaled a fundamental shift in government attitudes or practices with respect to disseminating politically sensitive or embarrassing information. Indeed, the federal government has embraced numerous policy and administrative initiatives in the 1990s which have actually *eroded* the informational rights of citizens, steadily depleting the "information commons" supporting civic engagement in Canada.

Firstly, for at least a decade the federal government has increasingly commercialized and commodified its considerable information resources and data collection capabilities. Since the late 1980s, for example, Statistics Canada routinely charges citizens fees for accessing a variety of information "products," despite that fact these have already been paid for with tax dollars. The commodification of government information in this manner raises barriers to the availability of information, and while seldom covering the true costs of its production, has the effect of dampening demand for it.

Secondly, both the federal government and its provincial counterparts have adopted a less forthcoming approach to access to information requests in the 1990s. Increasing administration fees have led to a decline in the number of requests received nationwide. In Ontario, for example, fee increases for standard requests led to a 50% drop in the number received between 1995 and 1997. Cuts to departmental budgets for administering access to information requests have also had a negative impact on access to information by increasing processing times and delays. The incidence of outright denials of requests has increased as well.

Finally, recent public sector restructuring initiatives, including privatization, devolution and outsourcing, have had disturbing implications for the informational rights of citizens and the transparency and accountability of government. Many newly created corporations, agencies, and outsourcing arrangements, such as the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, NAV Canada and the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board, have been placed beyond the reach of the federal *Access to Information Act*, despite no change in the salience of the activities carried out under them to the public interest. By creating a more fragmented and confusing system of accountability and governance, in general, such initiatives have increased what Alastair Roberts calls the "organizational opacity" of government. Together with the above-mentioned practices of commodification and freedom of information, such administrative and policy trends have had a corrosive impact on the informational rights of Canadian citizens and are at least as if not more indicative of the government's current approach to information dissemination than the rhetoric of GOL suggests.

The implications of e-government for privacy rights and government use of personal information is also worth mentioning here. E-government advocates suggest that networked computers will dramatically improve government's ability to share and exploit information across functional and jurisdictional "silos" in order to better coordinate and fashion public policies. It will also enable it to use personal information for the purposes of data-matching and surveillance. Already CCRA maintains agreements with over 300 organizations to share data on Canadian taxpayers, including an agreement with HRDC to match all CCRA Traveler Declaration cards to EI claimant files, in order to combat EI fraud. Combined with the erosion of citizen information rights detailed above, then, e-government has the potential to foster disturbing asymmetries of information between government and citizens. If the latter come to equate e-government with increasing invasions of privacy or denials of benefits or services, such as license plate renewals (as occurred in Ontario a few years ago), as a result of some unrelated activity, they are more likely to become suspicious rather than kindly disposed toward government.

VOTING ALONE: E-CITIZENS OR E-CONSUMERS?

Finally, advocates of e-government suggest that the availability of on-line government information and new channels for communication between government and citizens will stimulate more political participation and democratic dialogue within Canada, thereby revitalizing the nation's public sphere. While it is early days for reaching any definitive conclusions regarding this assertion, however, a few early warnings signs signal the need for caution here.

Firstly, no Canadian studies exist to demonstrate that the availability of on-

line information stimulates increased political engagement. While Canadians appear to have embraced government Web sites, they are far more likely to be seeking information on employment opportunities, health matters and recreation than they are to be engaging in policy deliberations. Furthermore, a recent American study by Bruce Bimber showed that using on-line information sources correlated with no increase in political participation, other than making on-line campaign donations. Robert Putnam, author of the much debated *Bowling Alone*, found that those citizens who relied most heavily on on-line sources of news and public affairs information were less politically engaged than those who relied on traditional print media.

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Some indication of the potential for GOL to stimulate a renewal of citizen/government relations is also suggested by recent attempts to stimulate voter turnout by the prospect of on-line voting. Some have suggested that on-line voting will increase political participation by making voting easier and more convenient. There is little to suggest, however, that Canadians avoid participating in elections because it is too difficult for them to do so. In fact, the sharpest decline in voter turnout in recent years occurred just as the process was made more rather than less accessible. Declining turnout, particularly among youth in Canada, has more to do with low interest and low efficacy, as a result of the electoral and party systems, than it does with problems of access. The alienating effects of the former cannot be ameliorated simply by using technology to make a system already perceived as fundamentally flawed merely more accessible.

In addition, a growing body of research suggests that on-line participation by so-called e-citizens may be qualitatively different from off-line forms of civic engagement and participation. The personalization features of the Internet provided by various filters and customization tools have the potential to lead to the "cyberbalkanization" of the on-line public sphere into increasingly insulated groups of like-minded "interest-based communities" who increasingly know and care more and more about less and less. This research points to the potentially damaging effects of the Internet on social cohesion, and contrasts it with the socially integrative effects of more deliberative styles and forums of face-to-face political communication. Research on virtual communities and the quality of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) appears to support his concern. While the Internet has proven a powerful means of gathering and sharing information, it is a predominantly individualistic and expressive medium which facilitates talking over listening, deliberation and the give-and-take of face-to-face communication; leading, as Putnam suggests, "not to deliberation, but to din." Concern such as this is also supported by research on face-to-face forms of civic participation. The fact of co-presence absent from on-line forms of discussion is at least more likely to orient participants to a public good transcending their own individual interests.

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As such, the implications of the Internet for the quality of political engagement appear consistent with a more general and worrying trend observed by Putnam, among others, toward increasingly individualized, privatized and expressive acts of grievance articulation at the expense of forms of activity involving the aggregation of interests and cooperative forms of addressing grievances. In terms of the effect of a program like the Government of Canada's GOL, with its emphasis on convenience and customization to personal tastes and informational needs, the likelihood is one of this trend being reinforced. Experiments in deliberative polling and on-line consultations are on-going, such as the Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada's on-line Consultation Workbook. However, insufficient research has been carried out on these or other aspects of the Government of Canada's on-line presence to know whether it will promote genuine deliberation and meaningful participation or facilitate the further balkanization and decline of the public sphere in Canada.

CONCLUSION

There is little question that the current degree of political malaise in Canada is disturbing. An April 2002 Leger Marketing survey of citizen attitudes toward government found that almost 70% of respondents believed the federal government was at least somewhat corrupt, and fully one quarter agreed with the statement that our current system of government was not democratic. Small wonder, then, that schemes like GOL are being taken up by government, despite little proof of a salutary effect on political engagement and legitimacy. Without denying some potential benefits in this respect, however, it is important for governments and citizens alike to carefully weigh them against the potentially negative consequences for citizenship and democracy attached to the e-government agenda. Rather than bringing us closer together as members of the Canadian political community, it may well drive us further apart.

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