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The Information Polity: Towards a two speed future?

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Abstract. The overarching argument here is that only a 'whole polity' perspective, an 'information polity' perspective, can be satisfactory as both a starting and finishing point for the predictive endeavour being set out in this special edition. The organising image is one of seeing two trajectories at work in the polity, trajectories that hitherto have too often been treated as separate but which are ineluctably intertwined. The first of these trajectories is that of information intensifying government/governance and the second, the trajectory associated with communications intensifying democratic character of the polity as both formally initiated in experimentation and innovation and in the informal, spontaneous democratic impulses that have emerged from the era of social networking, or 'web 2.0'. Drawn together these trajectories make up the wider polity, an information- and communications-intensive polity. Separating them for analytical purposes allows examination of the different paces of change in each of these trajectories, enabling speculative conclusions to be drawn, perhaps more accurately than otherwise, about what to expect in this century's third decade.

Keywords: Polity, information-intensity, government, governance, democracy, the future

1. Introduction

> *"... despite Internet instantaneity, despite the 24/7 event focused nature of the mass media and the impact of that upon politics ... the past nevertheless has a strong future.* [Pollitt, 2008, pp180/81]

In this paper I take the view that a 'forward look', an attempt to glimpse the future, such as the one upon which we are collectively engaged in this volume, should be carefully conceived. A forward look must firstly ground the analysis it brings forward upon an assessment of where we are at the present time, recognising that the present, if not always a springboard to the future, is nonetheless the necessary point of departure. Furthermore, and logically, it follows that to know the present requires us to bring forward ideas and evidence from the past that bear upon our understanding of the present. With this approach I am asserting, therefore, that both explanation of the present *and* prediction are ineluctably connected with the past. Secondly, and especially so in the fields of government, democracy and politics, it would be foolish to engage in a predictive endeavour without reference to the practical considerations to which such an endeavour gives rise. Here I am thinking of the practical implications for government agents, administrative and political, that flow from analysis of this kind. If the [modestly proffered] predictions of this chapter are to be taken at all seriously they have implications for policy planning and it is to their broad implications that I turn at the end of this paper.

This groundedness in practice is one of the core characteristics of the field of public administration [34] and it is from within this subject field that this paper is written. Public administration, both as subject and as practice, is rooted in the wider political system. Scholars of public administration must, and frequently do, acknowledge the significance of their work for the wider policy and democratic environment. For policymaking practitioners this set of wider relationships is the *sine qua non* of their work. For this reason I prefer to focus upon the 'polity' for an holistic analysis of past, present and future, taking the view that focusing only upon the narrower 'governance' or the even narrower 'government' will prove too partial a depiction of the future to be of much significance. To cite a preferred definition, by way of capturing this holism, the polity is *"an organised society: the state as a political entity"* [Shorter Oxford English Dictionary]. It is the polity, therefore, which is my ultimate unit of analysis in this paper. Also, I further prefer to use the word 'information' adjectivally alongside 'polity', thus creating the concept of an 'information polity' [9,57,59], a concept that should sit comfortably alongside broad equivalents, 'information society' [65] and 'information economy' [23].

I have long held that understanding information management and flow, both theoretically and empirically, will take scholars to the heart of understanding government, governance and the wider polity [56] and especially so as the intensity of information and communication in and around government strengthens. Also, I argue, such a perspective is supporting better understanding amongst practitioner communities than more familiar technology-led concepts such as 'e-government' and 'e-democracy' can do. To lay stress upon the electronic in these ways is to make more opaque than it need be the consequence of new technology adoption and use upon the state and its relationships with its citizens [59]. To lay stress upon information flows in and around government, including those between government and its citizens, prepares the way for evidence gathering and analysis that should inform public policymaking in ways that the heavily normative world of new information and communications technologies [ICTs] largely fails to do. From the latter perspective, often all seems possible, from the former, issues are raised that seem near intractable in some instances. I point out in this paper the importance of some of these informational issues and how the 'e' perspective in effect led to them being ill understood with serious consequences for both government and democracy.

In the past three decades in particular we have seen how managing and communicating information has changed in all business sectors, including in government, as well as in the wider communities of consumers and citizens. The advent of mass computing, the development of digital computer networking and, most recently, the burgeoning use of the Internet for commerce and business, for government on-line and as a social medium enabling, *inter alia*, democratic discourse, have afforded these changes in information and communication management. Many have presented these developments as 'technological', hence the ubiquity of the prefix 'e', but, as stated above, here such a view is deemed mistaken not least because of the way such a perspective has given a spurious legitimacy to separate development in the fields of 'e-government' and 'e-democracy', separate both as a field of study and as practice. E-Government [and e-governance], in particular, stimulated by a gathering regime of international measurement and by scholarly and practitioner communities keen to establish their differentiation from the mainstream, has come to be pursued as an entity in its own right. This separate development provides one of the cornerstones of the analysis in this paper, ultimately leading me to argue that it is already breaking down and will continue to do so, to be replaced by a more holistic understanding of the wider polity.

Second here, a further tendency towards separation, that of largely replacing a wider polity focus with narrower and separated ones on government and democracy, both in practice and in scholarship, harbours considerable problems for understanding both how to explain the present day and how to plan for the future in an era of mass communication. Separating polity-wide modes of discourse, including

new forms of more or less spontaneous democratic participation afforded by the Internet, and viewing them, at worst, as relatively unconnected to government and governance in policy formation and delivery or, at best, as matters for footnoting, carries with it the prospect of analytical and predictive failure. Here, I argue, therefore, that not only have separate e-government and e-governance been mistaken perspectives in the way outlined above but so too is a separate perspective on 'e-democracy'. Indeed, and to reinforce the general proposition stated above, only a 'whole polity' perspective, an 'information polity' perspective, can be satisfactory as both a starting and finishing point for our predictive endeavour.

My organising image for this paper, therefore, is one of seeing two trajectories at work in the polity, trajectories that hitherto have too often been treated as separate but which I want here to argue are ineluctably intertwined. The first of these trajectories is that of information intensifying government/governance [58] [conventionally, e-Government/governance] and the second, the trajectory associated with communications intensifying democratic character of the polity as both formally initiated in experimentation and innovation and in the informal, spontaneous democratic impulses that have emerged from the era of social networking, or 'web 2.0' [32]. Drawn together these trajectories make up the wider polity, an information- and communications-intensive polity. Separating them for analytical purposes allows examination of the different paces of change in each of these trajectories, enabling speculative conclusions to be drawn, perhaps more accurately than otherwise, about what to expect in this century's third decade. Looking at trajectories of change and development in this way pays due regard to the quotation at the head of this paper and especially to the notion that 'the past has a strong future'.

2. Information-intensifying government

I discern three short, overlapping phases in the development of information-intensive government in the UK during the past two decades, each of them, both separately and in combination, pointing both to the slow pace of achievement as well as more to failures than successes. The first of these phases, roughly from the mid 1990s to year 2000 is the era of 'direct government'; the second from c2000 to 2005, the era of 'orthodox e-government'; and the third the era of 'transformational government', a more holistic appreciation of 'government in the round' that, broadly, continues to the present time.

government.direct [1996], was the first comprehensive statement of intent to exploit new information and communications technologies [ICTs] by UK government in pursuit of improved service provision to citizens and business, and as such helped define the first of these development phases. The approach outlined was one in which a set of guiding principles would underpin development. These seven principles included *choice* [electronic delivery was to be only one service channel amongst others], *confidence* in terms of safeguarding personal information, and *accessibility* meaning that services being provided whether at a 'public access terminal' or a 'one-stop shop' would be easy to use.[1] This document, published before policymakers perceived the prospects of the internet, now makes for quaint reading in this current period when so much is expected from on-line government. Its value for this essay, however, lies both in its early articulation of many of the issues that are still profoundly relevant in 2012, not least those issues attendant upon the three highlighted principles above, and for the way in which it enables us to see how relatively little of those early visions has been achieved.

The second phase of development I refer to as the era of orthodox 'e-government', in effect the official designation during this period. This period was given impetus by the modernising government,

[1]The other 4 principles adduced in the document are 'efficiency', 'rationalisation', 'open information' and 'fraud prevention'.

agenda [16], by the appointment of an e-Envoy to lead development across government, and further stimulated, as set out below, by the international benchmarking for e-government that began at that time. This then was the era of orthodox e-government, an era exemplified in 2000 by a report [52] setting out the vision and expectations associated with a new wave of investment by government in ICT applications. It promised services tailored to individual needs, more joined-up government services, and opportunities for a 'mixed economy' of service provision that could include organisations from private and voluntary sectors. As in the first phase, identified above, those issues associated with choice, confidence and accessibility were identified again though it was somewhat later in this second period that major issues related to confidence came most strongly to the fore with the emergence of what was to become a major debate in the UK on the so-called 'surveillance society' [5,8,35,36].

For the most part this second phase was the era of mainstream or orthodox e-government, as I say above, and, although a new and third phase began in the middle part of the last decade, that of 'transformational government', the e-government benchmarking regime has persisted through to the present time.

Thus, alongside the second and third of these three phases has run a continuous and continuing trajectory of e-government benchmarking, a seemingly institutionalised approach to measuring 'progress' in the national implementation of on-line services availability. Such benchmarking studies [eg Cap Gemini [EU] 2010; UN 2010] have largely focused upon the availability of selected government services for on-line users and at the levels of sophistication being applied to those provisions, whether they are available in terms of simple on-line information that supports substantive access in an off-line mode or in terms of transactions being enabled between a citizen or business and government agencies entirely on-line.

Specific critiques of this 'measurement industry' include its tendency to measure only that which can be measured quantitatively [37]; the wildly different conclusions that different surveys reach about the state of e-government in specific countries [64]; and the distortive effects such surveys can have on policymaking and resource allocation [6]. A more general critique is that its focus on 'supply side' has led to insufficient reflection on the uptake of such services, on the merits and preparedness of various delivery channels and on the 'user experience' of services and channels.

Uptake of available government services on-line is surprisingly low in an era of high uptake for private sector provision of services on-line. Public familiarity with web-provided services has increased gradually during the past decade yet, despite this, the uptake of government provided services remains low. A recently published UK survey [29], one conducted bi-annually since 2003, makes these points clear. That survey shows that 73% of UK citizens now access the world-wide web, a figure that has increased from 59% in 2003. These figures suggest that without further stimulation Internet access may have more or less 'plateau-ed'. Measures currently underway that are seeking to enlarge the 'internet population are discussed below. Importantly, this survey also shows that 32% of citizens in the UK represent a rapidly rising group of users referred to as 'next generation users', so-called because of the life-style embedding of internet access displayed within the group. This group [of all ages] has increased from 13% of internet users in 2007, a core characteristic of the group being the multiple devices, both portable and fixed, from which the web is accessed by its members. As a proportion of total internet users this group is enlarging at a faster pace than internet users as a whole. Finally, this survey shows that uptake of government services on-line has increased steadily throughout the period, with 57% now reporting uptake in 2011 for one or more services, though that level of uptake is largely explained by citizens searching for information rather than transacting for services. Moreover, these levels of uptake of government provision compare sharply with findings for uptake online of privately provided services. 86% of internet users now 'buy on-line', 84% undertake product comparisons, 78% make travel reservations, 60% do banking on-line.

Whilst these low uptake figures for on-line government persist to the present time in the UK and elsewhere it should be noted that in the third phase of development, from 2005 to the present time, a shift in strategic emphasis has occurred whereby the separate designation and practice of 'e-government' has been largely removed in favour of a 'whole of government' approach, carrying the title 'transformational government' [2,47]. Here the stated emphasis is upon realising transformations that fold together gains for the consumer through improved service provision with gains for the citizen through new, lower cost organisational and process redesigns. A change of government in the UK from 2010 has seen this trend continue with the adoption of a new pan-government strategy for information management and provision [19,20] and with an additional commitment consistent with the thrust of emergent behavioural research and the creation of 'choice architectures' [3,61]. This new behaviourally informed strategy is being made manifest in a robust 'digital by default' approach to service delivery, especially, though not exclusively, in the area of welfare benefits claims. This strategy aims, therefore, at achieving higher levels of on-line service uptake as well as the realisation of cost efficiencies anticipated to follow. This strategy is further supported through a large-scale initiative, *Race Online 2012*, which aims to draw those without Internet familiarity [8.2m UK citizens at February, 2012] into the on-line community. The strategy also aims at delivering a more integrated approach to information provision through the culling of many government websites and a focus instead upon the single site *Directgov,* the government's main web portal.

Thus, identified to this point is a past two decades in which different phases of development have occurred as government has sought to exploit ICTs in the delivery of services and in its own organisational structures and processes. The evolution of those three principles from our first phase, *choice*, *confidence* and *access*, can be traced throughout these two decades. A commitment to *choice* through 'multi-channel' strategies for service delivery can be found throughout almost the whole of this period. Only now in 2011/12 do we see a firmer 'push' to getting citizens on-line through the strategy of 'digital by default' and its associated effort of achieving high levels of internet familiarity, *Race Online 2012*. It is not hard to speculate that the tipping point for this sharp change of emphasis is the need for expenditure control and contraction and the continuing promise that necessary financial stringency can be achieved through a more robust form of transformational government than hitherto. Thus *choice* as a policy principle, and as related to service delivery channels, has declined somewhat at the end of this period. Alongside this attempt to reduce channel choice for delivering government services to the end consumer is a further surge in the introduction into public service providing of both voluntary and private sector organisations. The current UK government's 'big society' initiative [12,22,25] builds upon previous and similar strategies [38,49–51] by seeking to bring a range of providers into delivering on-line public services, albeit within the framework set by 'digital by default'.

What then about the second of these principles brought forward here from the 1990s, *confidence*. In the second phase looked at here the building up of arguments can be found about the role of the state as a surveillance state, particularly because of the spread of CCTV, because of the development by governments of large and often controversial databases, including a proposed identity register, and because of custodianship failures, as large scale losses of information occurred. The present government has declared itself opposed to some though not all of these developments in the first two points above, in particular withdrawing from identity cards and closing some of the most controversial databases. Confidence in government remains an issue, however, as research underpinning welfare reform demonstrates [3]. Here, looking at welfare claimants seeking work under a government scheme, the researchers found that "*Across all of these claimant groups was an overarching concern about internet security, particularly in relation to entering personal and financial information into websites"*.

Finally, we identified *access* as a guiding principle from our first phase. We have seen above how, to this point, governments have largely failed in achieving anticipated levels of access to on-line service provisions. We have seen also how the current government is seeking to remedy this major problem through both a form of enforcement [digital by default] and through a programme of skilling [*Race Online 2012]*.

Related to access, however, is a further major issue, one largely overlooked at the beginning of our periods examined here, that of identity management [IDM], the *sine qua non* of access to many transactional services offered by government on-line as well as to the achievement of personalised services including the desirable integration of services at the point of the citizen [62]. In the first phase identified here, IDM was scarcely recognised as a problem, unsurprisingly because 'face-to-face' was the dominant mode of delivery to the citizen at that time and services being delivered were largely informational. In the second and third phases examined here IDM has come to be seen as a major concern, essentially for two reasons. First, from the government perspective, as ambitions to widen the scope of services delivered on-line have grown, so a robust means of identifying the on-line citizen has become essential. To illustrate this point, in previous research [60] we have seen how a citizen application for a seemingly basic service, a provisional driving licence, was accompanied by a complex set of back office data flows aimed at producing an identity 'trust score' sufficient to deliver the service on-line. If high level transactional services are to be delivered on-line then government will require the highest attainable assurance of the identity of recipients. Second, from a citizen perspective, such procedures should not only be designed for convenience in service provision through personalised and integrated services, for example, but also be designed to protect individual privacy. Currently, the preferred approach in the UK and in numerous other countries is 'federated identity assurance' [FIDA] a model of IDM that requires a third party host to authenticate identity with [in the UK case] a commitment to the 'unlinkability' of the citizen's on-line activity so as to protect personal privacy [45]. In this arrangement the third party provides citizen identity to government on behalf of the citizen who has enrolled with them. This third party identity provider agrees username and password etc. with the citizen and is able thereby to authenticate their identity to government. This system is not yet introduced in the UK though it has been announced. It raises fundamental questions in the light of what has been written here: 'will citizens use such a system?', will it bring confidence into the citizen/government relationship?; will it enlarge uptake of government services on-line?' These questions will be returned to in the final part of this paper.

Now, I turn to the democratic nature of the contemporary polity. Here, two streams of democratic change occurring at the present time are examined, each of them 'given *birth*' largely in our second period, as above, but 'given *force*' in the third and present period. The first of these democratic streams can be seen as a reaction to developments in on-line government service providing, as discussed above. As emphasis has changed from understanding on-line government as a technological exercise [a fixation with the 'e'] to one of *information* intensity [a fixation with the 'i'], including in particular the collection and management of *personal* information, so a range of broader, democratic issues have come to the fore. The second stream of issues in the democratic polity arises not from a critique of government practice but from new interpretations of democratic impulses arising in the contemporary polity. Using a largely conventional typology I ask 'what forms of democracy are ascendant [if any] and which are in decline?'

3. The citizen in the polity – democratic reaction to information-intensive government

Consequential upon the emphasis on the *electronic* being pushed gradually aside by an emphasis upon the *informational* we have seen, in the UK, a developing concern about the nature of the changing

'social contract' between citizen and state [41]. We have referred above to concerns with forms of government surveillance, to mistrust about the proposal for a national identity register, to seemingly ubiquitous CCTV including its variants such as ANPR [automated number plate recognition [60,66], and to the commissioning of massive scale databases of various forms of personal information [4]. All of these, together with the more arcane matters relating to the capture of personal information in on-line transactions, are profoundly informational in their nature. How then should this panoply of information-intensive activities be interpreted from a citizen perspective in a contemporary democratic polity?

In seeking briefly expressed answers to this question I draw on previous papers [60] that reveal the Janus face of information-intensive government in its relations with citizens. Thus, we see government seeking to provide a more secure environment for its citizens in an era of international terrorism; we see governments introducing cameras into towns and cities in an effort to reduce street crime. Here, it might be said, we have a neo-Hobbesian social contract being imposed by government upon its citizens for, without it, life would be "solitary, poore [sic], nasty, brutish and short". In addition we see government seeking the tools of convenient identification that will allow citizens to access its services and we see a developing belief [now somewhat reduced] in the merits of 'big databases' allowing in principle both for more personalised services to citizens and more evidence-based approaches to public policy making. The question of balance in the democratic judgment to be made in the myriad of instances where unacceptable privacy intrusions can be alleged on one side of the debate and where acceptable levels of improvement in safety, security, fraud and crime reductions, convenience and service, can be asserted on the other, has yet to be struck [28,60]. The use of privacy enhancing technologies [28] and privacy and surveillance impact assessments have been proposed and, so too, has the concept of 'contextual integrity' as the guiding principle for such assessments [47,48]. The new 'social contract' between government and citizen has not yet been signed.

In the next section, though, we ask whether what Vickers referred to [63] as the 'appreciative setting' for public policy [the readiness of the public to favour one direction of change over another] is shifting now to one that places less emphasis than previous settings on the sanctity of personal privacy and, rather, is concerned with realising the benefits that release of personal information can bring.

4. The citizen in the democratic polity – out with the 'old' idealism and in with the new realism?

Idealised visions of the emergence of new and enhanced modes of democracy have been seen across polities throughout the world. Over recent decades, enthusiasm has grown over the revolutionising and innovatory potential of these technologies as well as their practical consequences to be introduced into forms of democratic practice. Thus on a more or less standard typology of democracy we see attempts to strengthen *representative democracy* through the use of ICT [1,24,39]; we see arguments for the realisation of the affordances of ICTs for *direct forms of democracy* [13,33,55] we see a multitude of experiments in formalised modes of e-*participation* [54]; and we see the opening of possibilities for new '*deliberative spaces'* within which political engagement can occur [10,67].

For the most part, as many of those sources cited above reveal, little of this enthusiasm or, indeed, that idealism, remains today. Whilst systems of e-voting, both on-line and using machines in voting stations, are still experimented with [33] these are no longer seen as revolutionary or indeed as providing the solution to the perceived problem of low electoral turnout. Indeed some have argued that such voting systems carry too much democratic jeopardy [7]. Similarly, whilst structured forms of e-participation remain in some places they are no longer seen as having significantly positive outcomes for communities

in which they have been established [54]; that is they are no longer seen as holding the key to a new form of profoundly participatory democratic involvement. As Pratchett and his colleagues conclude *"The links between e-participation and community empowerment are surprisingly weak."* [54].

Just as with our commentary upon early forms of digital and e-government, it seems, therefore, that what I term 'techno-hubris' led to inflated democratic idealism, stoking expectations that proved too high. Just as the emphasis on e-government has now shifted towards the 'i', as I say above, so in this area of democratic development, I am also seeing emphasis shifting from the 'e' to the 'i' as well as to the 'c' of communication. When viewed from an 'e' perspective the experimental landscape of e-democracy looked entirely promising, when viewed as concerned with flows of information and its communication, including the assurance and integrity of information, profound questions arise.

This critical analysis offered here is an outcome, then, of this profoundly important change in perspective. Two additional shifts in the nature of information and communication in society lend further strength to this analysis, also. First, is the changing landscape of information provision and availability that applies both to government and to the core 'agents' of the internet, the search engines and the large social networking companies in particular. Freedom of information, whilst being resisted in different ways by many public bodies [15,30], has nonetheless had some spectacular 'successes' in the UK since its introduction in 2005, particularly because of its support of press and activist investigations [11,27]. This openness 'movement' is also supplemented by unofficial information provision such as that released by Wikileaks [www.wikileaks.org; mirror.wikileaks.info/]. Moreover, the UK and US government have engaged upon a wide-scale programme of release of official data [www.data.gov.uk; www.data.gov] resulting in a gradually developing set of tools for making wider use of big data sets [21]. Finally, in terms of more open data provision, we see 'monetising' social networks and search engines identifying commercial gains in on-selling search data, trending data etc. [15,31]. Whilst many argue that these powerful engines of the information age may be threatening personal privacy values, arguably at a more general level, they are contributing to the general environment of information availability that we are discussing here, thereby contributing to what may be an emergent Zeitgeist of open information and communication.

It is this open communication, or 'mass collaboration' as Leadbetter [40] prefers, that forms the second shift to which we refer above. Thus the shift towards more openness of information is seemingly intertwined with a parallel, popular shift in new modes of communication, as the burgeoning use of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, for example, testifies [30]. This massive involvement with social networks, afforded by multiple internet access devices, near ubiquitous wi-fi, 3/4G mobile communications and near universal levels of broadband sufficiency may well give rise to a new and stronger mode of participatory democracy. Here as Loader & Mercea argue [42, p. 2] we are departing from *"restricted and constrained formulations of rational deliberation with its concomitant requirement for dutiful citizens"* to *"a focus upon the citizen-user as the driver of democratic innovation . . . "*.

But how ineffably democratising are these new media? Loader and Mercea [42], cited above, warn that we should *"be wary of celebratory accounts"* [p10] and agree therefore with Coleman [24], writing before the onset of social networking as currently understood, who argued *"there is no automatically democratic character to the new media; democratic practice must be established within political culture and not depended upon as if it were an inevitable property of a technological package"*. Similarly Morozov [44] warns against the too easy assumption that the new communications media are a liberating force for peoples living in oppressive regimes. Indeed he argues that such media are all too often accorded a 'cyber-Utopian' value by liberal democracies seemingly blind to the ways in which those same regimes are being provided with identifying information to use against the people who have revealed themselves

on-line. Indeed within so-called liberal democracies social networks appear to excite the prospect of illiberal behaviour by government agents. In a recent revelation, a local government official argued that by using false identities and joining Facebook, for example, citizen opposition to council policy could be identified and retaliatory action put in place (councilwatchuk.co.uk [26]).

5. Towards a two speed polity?

I argued at the outset of this paper that it was necessary to examine evidence from the past and present in order to make [albeit hesitant] predictions about the future. The backward glance I have taken has been largely one over the past two decades and perhaps the main finding from this has been that in both sets of debates [about government and about democracy in the information age], including the policy papers and research examined, a profoundly important shift of emphasis is in evidence. In the debates both about ICTs in government and in democracy I have sought to show how the policy and research emphasis has shifted considerably, though not entirely, away from being technology-led *per se* and towards being concerned with what those technologies afford: the development of informational and communications opportunities for governments, for activists and for citizens. It is upon my analysis of these developing opportunities that I base my closing remarks including my hesitant predictions about the polity of the near future.

Can we expect a polity in which citizen familiarity with the internet and with on-line service providing by government is massively increased from present levels? Can we expect government to have resolved the 'wicked issue' of identity management, thus enabling uptake of services on a truly digital by default basis with protection of personal privacy guaranteed? Can we expect a democratic polity massively enlivened by the engagement of many millions of citizens on social media sites? Can we expect our governments to engage liberally on those sites? Can we expect governments to free up more and more of their information holdings, moving emphatically in the direction that the spirit of open government and freedom of information would suggest?

If we take seriously the view found in the quotation at the beginning of this paper, that "the past has a strong future", then the answer to each of these questions is 'no'. The answer is in the negative because evidence and analysis of the recent past does not inspire confidence in predicting major shifts implied if those questions were answered in the affirmative.

Impressionistically, it might appear that the government side of this analysis might continue to move slowly into the future, given the slow pace of change in the past, whilst the democratic side might speed up significantly, given the expectations that seem largely to surround the 'mass collaboration' afforded by new social media, and that, in consequence, a two speed polity might emerge with new and invigorated democratic engagement outpacing administrative endeavour. Indeed it might be in such a scenario that this 'new democracy' would place irresistible pressures on government to speed up, become more agile, less hierarchical in its culture [43] and more responsive to citizens as a consequence. It would require too, therefore that citizens became engaged in democratic discourse and service uptake at unprecedented levels, that consumer voice in respect of public services were heard more loudly and that public trust in government's handling of personal data rose considerably. The evidence, as opposed to the impressions, does not support such a conclusion, however, and that is how we must end this paper: that the future will be as slow paced and as contradictory in its policies and achievements as the past has been. Let optimisms subside, the past does indeed appear to have a very strong future.

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