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Introduction

The Internet and Governance in a Global Context

The Internet is a global phenomenon, but the way in which national governments respond to it varies with the political, social and economic context of a country. However, much that is written about the Internet and governance concentrates on a few advanced industrial societies, and especially the United States. Yet the federal and fragmented system of governance in the United States creates obstacles to the use of the Internet, while smaller countries from Estonia to Singapore produce innovations in e-governance. Moreover, even though the United States has more Internet users than any other country today, the growth points in the use of the Internet in the next few years will occur in radically different places, ranging from Russia and Brazil to India and China.

To understand the dynamics of e-governance we must consider its use in different contexts. The Internet is still a novel phenomenon, while governments have been around for a long time and the modern state came into existence before the invention of the typewriter and telephone. To write about e-governance while ignoring the prior existence of government institutions is to exogenize many factors that determine how and whether e-governance succeeds. In OECD countries, the Internet has been introduced in contexts where public administration institutionalizes a legacy from generations past, and information technology systems reflect a legacy of practices from different eras of computing. In developing countries, the Internet is being introduced in administrative contexts where information technology is sporadically in use.

The political and socio-economic context of developing countries likewise differs radically from that of OECD countries. Many developing countries have yet to bureaucratize public administration, a *sine qua non* for putting the delivery of public goods and services on line. In addition, many regimes are only partly open to public scrutiny and influence. Because e-governance can promote openness in the flow of ideas and information, its introduction may be resisted where the power of governors is exercised undemocratically or corruptly.

Governance is about the interaction of the state and society. It can refer to bureaucratic activities within government; to the processes by which government does or does not deliver services to citizens; and to the

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way in which citizens make claims for benefits to which they are entitled. e-Governance is about the use of information technology, and especially the Internet, as a means of facilitating interactions between the state and its citizens. While e-democracy is a logical complement of e-governance, many regimes in the world today are not democratic or only partly free. Thus, to understand uses of the Internet in a global context we must understand what happens in undemocratic as well as in democratic states.

The opening article of this special issue identifies critical dimensions that differentiate governments around the world, starting with contrasting levels of economic and telecommunications resources, bureaucratization, corruption and openness to public scrutiny – and analyzes their implications for the Internet. It also shows how the process of Internet diffusion will change the global population of Internet users as countries such as China and India increase the number of users while Scandinavia and the United States approach saturation. The article that follows by Ernest J. Wilson III makes clear the contingency and complexity of creating the infrastructure that is required for Internet use, and thus for e-governance. In developing countries neither the market nor government by themselves can overcome the inertia resistance to new technology. An alliance is required between innovators in different sectors of society.

The introduction of the Internet to systems of governance that fall short of the technical expectations of first world advisors risks failure, Richard Heeks shows, because many Internet systems have inscribed in them assumptions about institutions, procedures and technology that are not met by governments on many continents. The analysis of Internet use by the party-state in China shows that there is an alternative to degrading e-governance procedures to match the practices of corrupt and inefficient systems of government. Randolph Kluver argues that China's rulers want to use the Internet to get control of low-level cadres who now act out of sight of central government. The Internet offers Beijing the possibility of supervising their officials on line, and thus reducing local abuses of power that may undermine popular support and even the legitimacy of the nation's rulers.

The obstacle to the introduction of e-governance in OECD countries is the opposite: a legacy of entrenched bureaucratic institutions. At its worst, each agency of a government may have its own processes controlling interaction with those it serves and distinctive information technology that is not readily compatible with other public agencies. While a single agency may be able to introduce e-governance services, citizens will be frustrated if they must sign on and off a number of different web sites when their requests involve a multiplicity of national

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and local offices of government. The article by Westholm identifies alternative ways in which back office IT services can be integrated to provide the seamless delivery of services to citizens, and the article by Zuurmond discusses the implications of e-governance for classic theories of bureaucratic governance.

Concerns of individuals are represented by civil society organizations as well as by government institutions, and the Internet offers major advantages in enabling these institutions to communicate with existing members; to recruit new members; and to publicize their views. When institutions face increased difficulties in encouraging mobilization through face-to-face meetings, the Internet offers an opportunity for virtual communication among citizens with common interests. As Bruszt and his co-authors show, where civil society institutions are new the Internet has a special value for communication among members and drawing support trans-national. The article by della Porta and Mosca demonstrates that the Internet can also be used by anti-globalization protesters dissatisfied with all existing institutions of governance. It documents the use of the Internet to mobilize protesters from many countries to converge in the streets to demonstrate at meetings of intergovernmental organizations in Sweden and in Italy.

This special issue began with a three-day conference on the Internet and Governance in January, 2004, sponsored by the Oxford Internet Institute, directed by William H. Dutton, and with support from the Europaeum of Oxford University. Drafts of papers were discussed among authors and with comments from Jerzy Szeremeta of the United Nations New York, Edwin Lau of the Internet programme of OECD, Ivar Tallo, of the Institute for e-Governance, Tallinn, and Alexandre Trechsel and Marcus Maenz of the C2D Centre of the University of Geneva, and Helen Margetts, then of University College London. The editor particularly appreciates the promptness with which participants revised papers for publication here.

Richard Rose, Special Issue Editor

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