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Directgov: The Right Direction for E-government or a Missed Opportunity?

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Abstract:

The principal website of the UK government, "Directgov", is examined to determine whether it is a good example of e-government, in both narrow and broader senses. The narrow definition measures the website's success largely on economic factors whereas the broader definition encompasses the extent to which it facilitates or enables aspirations towards e-democracy. It is concluded that, despite being successful in the narrow sense, Directgov, constitutes a missed opportunity to broaden the scope of the website's functionality to provide an e-democracy model that would improve the relationship between citizen and state. A comparative assessment is presented of similar initiatives in Canada, USA, Singapore and Estonia.

Keywords: Directgov, e-democracy, e-government, UK government, citizen participation, portal

1. Introduction

The development, availability and convergence of new information and communication technologies are continually enhancing the functionalities of tools such as the internet, email and mobile phones. The speed of access to and interaction with information facilitated by high-speed (and often wireless) high bandwidth broadband has in the last decade been phenomenal in changing the way that many daily lives are conducted. One aspect of this new paradigm is availability of on-line interactions with local and national governmental services and processes; from information provision and routine transactions to participatory and political engagement. These interactions are collectively referred to as e-government. The formal study of the development of e-government has tended to consider it from perspectives that focus either on the scope (Grant and Cha, 2003) or functionalities (Azad and Faraj, 2007) of a specific government's offerings on-line. Research on typical citizen-users' assessment has been extensive in relation to local community e-government (Min et al, 2007), however less attention has been given to the interaction and expectations of citizens with national e-government initiatives (see, for example, Reddick, 2005; Welsh et al, 2008). Such national initiatives usually seek to use e-government to redress the perceived bureaucracy, inflexibility and disregard for citizen's needs that are frequently associated with current service provision (Stahl, 2005).

In the United Kingdom, with 66% of citizens now online (internetworldstats, 2007) the government recognised the need to modernise the way government services interact with citizens in the 21st century. The solution was to invest in the development of specific initiatives that would lead to an "e-government". However a significant number of expensive UK projects failed: for example, the computerisation of the Passport Office resulted in added delays and expenditure of £40 million and there were a number of projects within the Inland Revenue in which costs overran to almost £1.4 billion.

In March 2004, the UK Labour government launched "Directgov" which replaced the previous citizens' portal "UK online". Directgov is described as, "the place to turn for the latest and widest range of public service information" (Galindo, 2005).

Ambitiously, it aims to introduce users to numerous administrative, legal, regulatory and social services and functions now carried out on the internet via the common Directgov portal.

To assess whether Directgov is a model example of good e-government, the website will be analysed in terms of the aims and purposes of e-government, in both narrow and broader senses. A narrow definition of e-government is usually confined to measuring the economic benefit whereas a broader definition incorporates e-democracy as revolutionising informed and effective participation in the democratic process. This paper will argue that Directgov, partly encouraged by the European Information Society (Europe's Information Society Thematic Portal, 2007), has had success exclusively in the narrow sense. Though this is a critical stage in the functionality of a government portal (Irani et al, 2006), an opportunity is being missed to improve the relationship between citizen and the state. European and governmental policy continues to view e-government as principally a means of using self-service to reduce labour costs thereby cost-effectively providing a consistent level of service. Other nations' government portals that also stalled at a similar stage of development (Kunstelj and Vintar, 2004) are now beginning to realise this palpable opportunity and are embracing e-democracy. The UK government, though not the early adapter, will inevitably follow the trend of developments internationally to improve its relationship with the citizen.

2. Analysis of Directgov

Ever since the Bangemann Report (Bangemann 1994) envisaged "better government, cheaper government", the priority for e-government has been to place administrative services online thereby reducing costs of delivering services faster, and more efficiently, for their citizens (Mosse and Whitley, 2008). The current EU e-government action plan states, "e-government is the use of information & communication technologies (ICTs) to make public administrations more efficient and effective, promoting growth by cutting red tape" (Europe's Information Society Thematic Portal, 2007). The UK government has been eager to modernise government; it is hoped Directgov will become the dominant method of citizen-government interaction. It has now been four years since Directgov was launched; enough time has elapsed to enable adequate scrutiny of how effectively government services have transferred onto the citizen portal. The broad framework for analysis of Directgov is given in Table 1.

Primary factors	Secondary factors	Effects	Evaluation criteria
Accessibility	Information availability	Civic engagement	Quality of Participation
Underlying technologies	Infrastructure	Deliberative interaction	User demographics
Governmental organisation	Policy and legal	Enhanced democracy	On-line tone and style

	environment		(Wang et al, 2006)

Table 1 Factors, effects and evaluation metrics for participative e-government

(developed from Saebo et al, 2008)

To date the UK government has been successful in accessibility and information availability. Nearly all of its public services have been available on Directgov (Pinter, 2004) via over 900 central government websites. One can apply for their driving licence online, fill out a tax return or claim social security benefits. Directgov acts basically as a single convenient service channel linking together the different central government websites. The website is also available in the Welsh language. In terms of e-inclusion, Directgov has made sure that it is reasonably inclusive of society at large, not intentionally or overtly marginalising any large groups with obviously distinct needs. Furthermore, Directgov is also available via digital television and mobile phones enabling virtually everyone in the UK who would wish to access it. It is split into five sections; "home", "directories", "guide to government", "do it online" and the "newsroom".

"Home" provides information on a broad range of topics such as tax, education, employment and crime with options laid out clearly and easy to use. Furthermore, targeted advice is provided to key groups such as disabled people, over-50s, parents and young people.

"Directories" render it easy to locate all Departments and agencies in the public sector. However a citizen accessing Directgov would be unlikely to accomplish more than an experienced user of typical advertising-supported free-to-user search engines (for example; a simple Google (<http://www.google.co.uk>) search) could not readily achieve. In fact, many government portals possess powerful internal search engines but to a user they offer little apparent additional benefits over general search engines. Therefore, it is not a significant or particularly remarkable achievement that a Directgov search can easily connect one to over 900 public sector websites.

"Guide to the government" provides one with information about the government in a clear and simple language whereas the "Newsroom" keeps the citizen up to date with public sector news releases. Unfortunately, there is little interactivity between the citizen and this information; one simply digests the information. As a result, the government uses Directgov to simply dictate information to the citizen without them having a say in it.

The most ambitious section is "Do it online" which lets citizens carry out transactions with government agencies and departments online. This initiative is intended to underpin the governments boast that the public sector is as efficient as the private sector (Pinter, 2001). For example, under "Motoring Online" one can apply for a first provisional driving licence. A citizen must first register as a user, then apply online. As the process is fast and efficient, it demonstrates clearly the advantage of e-government. Avoided is the lengthy process of going to a Post Office, filling out a form, posting it and then waiting for a reply. However, not all transactions through Directgov are this fast and easy to use. For example, under "Money, Tax and

Benefits" in order to claim a tax repayment, the form must be printed out and posted to the HM Revenue and Customs Department <http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/individuals/iwtclaim-a-tax-or-ni-repayment.shtml> the form is called R40). Then one must wait up to four weeks for a reply. This incurs extra cost as forms must now be printed out by the citizen instead of collecting it personally from the Department. Overall, the process is (i) slow, (ii) offers little benefit over the traditional process and (iii) is certainly not up to the same standard of e-commerce service offered by business. Furthermore, applying for housing benefit is even more difficult and time-consuming: clicking on the link does not direct you to the form needed but to the department website <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/lifeevent/benefits/housing_benefit.asp> the form is called HCTB1>. From here it is not clear where the relevant form is and once located, the extensive forty-one page document must be printed then posted to the Department (although the form *can* be filled-out online, it cannot be submitted online, but must be either posted or preferably handed-in considering the confidentiality of the information provided). This process is (i) slow, (ii) expensive (ironically eligible applicants' will have low disposable income) and (iii) highlights the fragmented and inconsistent approach of different government departments to e-government. Currently, there are far too many forms that must be printed and posted and only a handful of transactions can be carried out entirely online. Forms must be used for a wide range of services such as applying for child maintenance, various loans, carer's allowance and paying national insurance contributions. It is clear that service efficiency of e-government in the UK still lags behind other institutions such as banks that made the transition to e-business. At the present time, Directgov's "do it online" section is misleading and until the vast majority of services can be completely entirely online it may be more accurate for it to be renamed "do it yourself."

Worryingly, it is unclear whether citizens are using Directgov in any great numbers. The average number of unique users in 2006 was around 2 million per month. This has increased steadily with the March 2008 audit reporting nearly 5.7 million unique users (a detailed statistical breakdown is available from <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/SiteInformation/DG_10036216>. This trend is likely to plateau as all early adopters are reached. It is unclear how many of these users are UK citizens. In terms of those that carry out online transactions via 'do it online' the percentage of users is far lower. For example, a typical week in July 2008 saw 1,603,099 visits to the Directgov site. Of these, only 151,629 visits were to the "do it online" section. 80,621 "do-it-online" users left Directgov to visit other government sites. However it is not possible currently to say how many went on to complete transactions (this is due to the transactional web pages (HMRC, DVLA etc) being hosted on sites external to Directgov (Perry, 2008). Furthermore, with an estimated 40 million internet users in the UK (this is changing all the time, see <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm#europe> the low penetration of Directgov hardly bodes well for it to become the dominant form of citizen interaction by 2010. Furthermore, research has found that both the style and content of Directgov has been received particularly badly by young people; a group the government has been criticised for failing to engage with (Digital Media Consultation Report, 2006). Overall, although Directgov provides a better scope and, in some instances, delivery of service than "UK online" and "open.gov.uk" there is considerable obvious potential (with the elementary example of having all form submittal on-line) for improvement. Some public services such as obtaining driving licences are faster and

more effective; a clear benefit in terms of the aims of 2010. However, the UK government must make it possible to carry out more transactions solely online (Irani, 2006) to make the cost savings of which other countries boast.

3. A missed opportunity?

With enhanced deliberative interaction and democratic participation (see Table 1), e-government has a potentially wider purpose than simply exploiting in the public sector, the benefits seen by e-commerce (Saebo et al, 2008). It is believed, "e-government has the potential to revolutionise the way that governments interact with the governed" (Schiavetta 2005) Although Directgov has been successful in providing easy access and information about services it can hardly be said to be re-engaging the citizen with government. The European Information Society asserts that, "e-government can also strengthen democracy by improving two-way communication between citizens and their government" (Europe's Information Society Thematic Portal, 2007). Current UK government strategy remains in the early stages of e-government development (Layne and Lee, 2001) being based on a business model of the citizen as a consumer consequentially Directgov offers a service that essentially facilitates customers of government services. As a result, Directgov does not really seek to reinvigorate democratic processes. Currently, there are no plans to introduce e-voting into Directgov despite a poor 61.3% turnout in the 2005 general election (Electoral Commission 2005). Liptrott (2006) stated, "falling turnouts at elections are of concern as voting is a basic act of democratic participation and citizens who do not vote tend not to participate in other civic activities". Implementing e-voting into Directgov has the potential to encourage citizens to using other on-line services available from the same portal.

"UK online", the previous citizen portal, offered 'Citizen-Space': the latter encouraged the citizen to 'take a more active role in government' and to 'find out how to have your say' (Morrison and Newman, 2001). Despite this, Morrison and Newman (2001) notes, "the reality is disappointing; this route offers 'know how' but this turns out to be more on 'how to complain' and involves simply contact points and routes to existing channels". Unfortunately this is much the same case if not worse with Directgov; there is no section which invites the citizen to 'have their say.' The Newsroom for example, offers news such as 'New Directgov mobile service' (Directgov, April 2007) but offers no forum/poll to discuss and obtain views as to whether citizens will use it or not. Simply broadcasting information will not necessarily improve accountability and trust in public sector information and expenditure. Communication is certainly not seen demonstratively as a two-way process. As a result, the website treats the user as a docile and passive recipient of information offering citizens little opportunity to engage in debate with, or even respond or comment to government. Morrison and Newman (2001) suggest that while the service role of government is important to citizens; "there seems little recognition that while these aims are worthy, even more may be possible by way of involving the citizen directly." Providing services such as assessing income tax and applying for a driving licence are unlikely to stimulate citizen participation in the democratic process. It is recommended that Directgov should allow citizens to comment on its news and should provide a more open and transparent citizen space envisaged by its predecessor. This is now the minimum that is expected from mass media sites such as BBC news. It is the interactivity that users expect from web 2.0.

Currently the "Newsroom" provides a link to the national executive together with both explicit and implicit representations of the political personae of the particular current Prime Minister (Bondebjerg, 2007) via the "10 Downing Street" website <http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page1.asp>. Here, the citizen can post or sign an e-petition or participate in web-chats with ministers. However, the site has been criticised heavily on the grounds that (i) the content did not satisfy the government's guidelines on content primarily (and ironically) due to those guidelines' inapplicability (ii) the website failed "to create a two-way link between government and people" (Wright, 2002) and (iii) it has been regulated poorly with many e-petitions for example having abusive or offensive content. There was obvious potential for Directgov to engage more with citizens if it asked for votes/feedback on issues. This lack of an adequate policy debate section within Directgov had been highlighted by the example of nearly 2 million citizens voting against road pricing on an e-petition. Many citizens had resorted to unaffiliated yougov polls to get their message across (Hinsliff and Jowit, 2007). Probably in the light of these shortcomings, in 2008 the site was revamped (see <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/ and the e-petition service using a charity e-governance site (see http://www.hearfromyourmp.com/ and http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>). The success of these changes is likely to lie with how effectively site-moderation facilitates debate without verging into censorship (Wright, 2006).

The functions and scope of national and local government processes that are distinctive to each tier are often unclear to citizens. It is thus recommended that the UK government strive to facilitate the participation of citizens in local council forums via Directgov. If it does not become all-encompassing, other websites that seek effectively to provide local community social networking such as "the local channel" <http://www.thelocalchannel.co.uk> will attract citizens disillusioned with the lack of both relevant and meaningful interactivity on Directgov.

4. International e-government progress

Where Directgov stands globally in terms of e-government progress may provide an outlook on what one could expect from Directgov in the future. Singaporean, Canadian, American and Estonian government portals are analysed briefly in order to paint a clearer picture of where Directgov stands. The Singaporean, Canadian and American portals were placed 1st, 2nd and 3rd respectively by an Accenture report (2007) on customer service. The United Kingdom was 9th on this list, disappointing considering the investment in e-government. Estonia was not included in the Accenture report. Like the government portals, the Accenture study focused on service delivery. However, it must be noted that all government portals in general are still in their infancy and there is yet to be one which realises the full potential of e-government. One of the key findings of the study was that, "Citizens' willingness to embrace a new generation of services outpaces governments' ability to deliver them." (Accenture, 2005) It is only a matter of time until citizens demand more interactivity with their government online than simply filing their tax return electronically. Unfortunately, there are only a few portals which have prioritised e-democracy over transactional and informational functions. Estonia is perhaps the only country to have focused largely on e-democracy when designing its web portal. When the transition towards e-democracy occurs, the internet may finally become the dominant form of

effective citizen-government interaction. In the Accenture study (2005) not any one country's citizens preferred using the internet to communicate with their government indicates a current failure of confidence in government portals.

4.1 The Singapore Government Portal, SinGov

A small country with less than five million people, Singapore has not been exemplified historically as an open and plural democratic society; SinGov is ranked currently as the world leader in customer service (Accenture, 2007). It is a well deserved achievement that sets an example for other governments to follow. SinGov is very easy to navigate in all four official languages of Singapore. There are four main sections to explore; "Government", "Citizens & Residents", "Businesses" and "Non-Residents." Clicking on the Citizens and Residents tab takes the user to the eCitizen portal. Here, like many other government portals, the citizen can carry out a large number of services online. There is also an online reporting centre to notify authorities of any public disturbances. Within eCitizen is a section called "Reach" which calls on citizens to voice their opinions; it is this section which sets SinGov apart from other government portals in terms of e-democracy.

"Reach" is a section entirely focused on improving e-democracy. It was set up in October 2006 to go beyond merely gathering public feedback, seeking instead to change fundamentally the way government communicates with citizens. "Reach" boldly invites "everyone to come forward and share ideas, and to take upon themselves by working out solution with the government to shape the home we want." (Reach, 2006). A Reach panel comprising of both members of parliament and private sector representatives effectively act as moderators that help define the role it plays in public consultation. Within "Reach" is the "People's Forum" where citizens can make their views on government policies known. There are also e-consultation papers and e-polls for the citizen to participate in. Reach also appointed a number of Junior Reach Ambassadors (JRA) in February 2008 to engage with younger people. These innovations help build trust, transparency and accountability between citizen and state. The ambitious aim is to allow its citizens to participate in shaping policy. It is clearly influencing overall e-government impact; Singapore jumped from 4th (2005) to 1st (2007) in the Accenture reports. It must be noted that a key reason for this rapid rise in ranking was Accenture's decision to change the ranking methodology in 2007; now included were quantitative citizen survey responses of which Singapore scored the highest by a considerable margin (Accenture, 2007). Singaporean citizens are much happier with the e-government service than their global peers. In terms of formal support for e-democracy; it outclasses every rival by a considerable margin. However both the range of political debate and strategic policy options are limited by moderators, so though the scope of on-line interactions are seemingly daring, in actuality the debate is conducted within a consensual political context of how best to implement agreed goals: it is indeed "shaping" rather than determining policy.

The UK government has a lot to learn from its Singaporean peer. Many of the innovations in "Reach" can be transferred to Directgov; the main challenge would be scaling-up to service the UK's considerably larger population. SinGov is the current model example of how a government can incorporate both the narrow and broader definitions of e-government to create an overall superior service; combining the cost efficiency of online transactions with the increased trust and transparency gain from

e-democracy. The challenge that remains for Singapore is to engage more citizens with SinGov; currently there are only just over 120,000 unique visits to SinGov per month, therefore with a population of over four million citizens participation is less than 3%. This indicates the government has some way to go to gain the trust of its citizens and encourage them to debate in what has traditionally been a more restrictive society. However, national e-democracy is an infant that in Singapore has indeed taken its first few steps.

4.2 Government of Canada Official Web Site

Canada was placed first by Accenture for five consecutive years for e-government maturity thus it should set an example to other countries. The Canadian portal is well organised and easy to navigate. There are three main sections "Our Governance", "Services" and "Resource centre" which offer information, forms and online transactions. The website is available in both English and French. Language sections are not divided demographically like Directgov on the main page but instead are within the "Service Canada" section. Overall, the layout is excellent making it easy to navigate through various government organisations. The portal can also boast that more than 100 frequently-used services are online. There are also ample opportunities for citizens to comment on the site and provide feedback in order to continuously improve the interface and information on the portal. In the future Service Canada promises to answer more questions online and improve service delivery. After browsing the site, it is clear it offers a more appealing interface and better service delivery than Directgov. Thus, in terms of the narrow definition of e-government Canada's portal is a resounding success.

In terms of e-democracy however, the portal does little to enhance participative democracy. Similar to Directgov, there are no polls or chat forums to comment on national policies or a political issue which is disappointing. The Canadian government has clearly gone to great lengths to move paper applications online and is probably considered the foremost e-government service. Unfortunately this has been to the detriment of e-democracy. Overall, the Canadian portal's key deficiency is the same as that of the UK's Directgov; namely it treats the citizen as a customer who has little say via the government internet resources in the democratic process or the accountability of government. The online service is a great success, yet as with Directgov, the Canadian government must not miss future opportunities to facilitate democratic processes.

4.3 The United States Government web portal, USA.gov

The US government portal, USA.gov has consistently ranked highly in customer service maturity and is currently placed 3rd by Accenture. The layout of the portal is very similar to Directgov with government information by topic and tabs for specific demographics. In terms of e-inclusion the US government has gone to great lengths to appeal to everyone. The website is available in both English and Spanish and has made some informational pages readable in over 25 languages through its "multi-language gateway." Also, the website can be altered quickly into three different text sizes. In terms of online transactions, the "Get It Done Online" section provides an alphabetical list of services offered which is impressive. The US government is clearly working towards increased cost efficiency by cutting red tape. The main

sections of USA.gov mirror SinGov however the "For Citizens" section is disappointing in terms of e-democracy. Of course, there is easy access to government agency information and plenty of transactions for citizens to carry out online. However, like many other government portals this is where the interactivity between government and citizen ends leaving the citizen as a customer dealing with the private sector. There is no section which invites the citizen to comment on national policy or polls to gain an insight into public opinion on a social issue. The Accenture report (2005) found that US citizens were the most reluctant to share personal information with their government. Including chat forums and live policy debate sessions would go along way in improving trust with the public sector. Citizens will feel they have, and indeed should have an ongoing say in government policies if they have the opportunity to engage politically with government online. The current US Presidential election has inspired millions of new voters and the candidates themselves have maintained a constant presence on the web. For example, searching "John McCain" or "Barack Obama" will take you to their personal websites which are often as interactive for the citizen as USA.gov itself. There are huge numbers of people that have visited these candidates' websites to make donations. Thus, it is clear there is huge potential for citizens to be involved in the democracy on a government portal. The US government is recommended to implement a two-way communication section into USA.gov to realise the true potential of e-government.

4.4 Estonia State Web Center

Despite being a small state with a population of little over one million citizens; the former soviet country has leaded the way in terms of e-democracy. Although the Estonian government portal does not offer the range of online transactions larger country's government portals offer, it more than makes up for this with its transparency and openness to citizen involvement in government policy. The Estonian government portal is not as visually attractive as rivals but arguably offers more substance. For example, "Tana Otsustan Mina (TOM)" translated as "Today, I decide" is a sincere effort to begin discussion and debates between citizen and state. The Estonian government sees this as key to improving accountability and transparency in decision-making. Any registered citizen can voice their opinion on a law or argue for a policy change. Once the citizen posts their idea, other users have two weeks to debate the proposal and the originator can defend and/or amend. Next, the proposal is voted on with a majority resulting in endorsement. The government then receives the proposal and can implement it or post an explanation for a rejection. The TOM portal has actually helped alter Estonian law such as changes to weapons regulation (Charles, 2004). This process is similar to the UK's e-petition on the Downing Street website however it is much more interactive and offers a higher chance to get a proposal enacted into law. The Estonian government's rapid progress could be emulated by the UK government. Of course, there are the extra challenges associated with scale in implementing this with almost 60 million more people in the UK than in Estonia; but with a high penetration rate of Directgov on mobile phones, the potential for anytime/anywhere e-democracy is huge.

5. European and UK government policy

It is clear that expenditure on Directgov has been on service delivery and access rather than e-democracy, which should be regarded as equally important. The problem

seems to lie with European and UK government policy objectives. A common view is that "E-Government is an entirely business oriented strategy to reduce costs and generate revenue by streamlining the delivery of citizen services. It operates parallel to and independent of the evaluation of e-democracy, which receives little to no official support or funding" (Paliwala 2005). Directgov is a prime example of this strategy of reducing costs. As a result, this has led to citizens being treated as merely a customer (rather than, to take the e-commerce analogy, the company shareholder) when communicating with government on Directgov. Figure 1 shows the dual path that should be taken by governments to achieve a broader e-government success. The aim should be to combine transactional e-government features with e-democracy features. As a result, a comprehensive review of a successful e-government portal should place it in the green zone (figure 1). Too many government portals, including Directgov, have focused towards the red path whilst ignoring the potential benefits offered by the blue path. Global studies by Accenture (2005, 2006 & 2007) and European Union acknowledgements have too often only recognised achievements in transactional e-government. Accenture (2007) did however; reward Singapore for its innovative citizen-centred approach. Of course, the non-causal e-democracy benefits are harder to quantify than transactional e-government features which can be measured by cost efficiency. This should not mean that governments neglect e-democracy in favour of fast and presentable results.
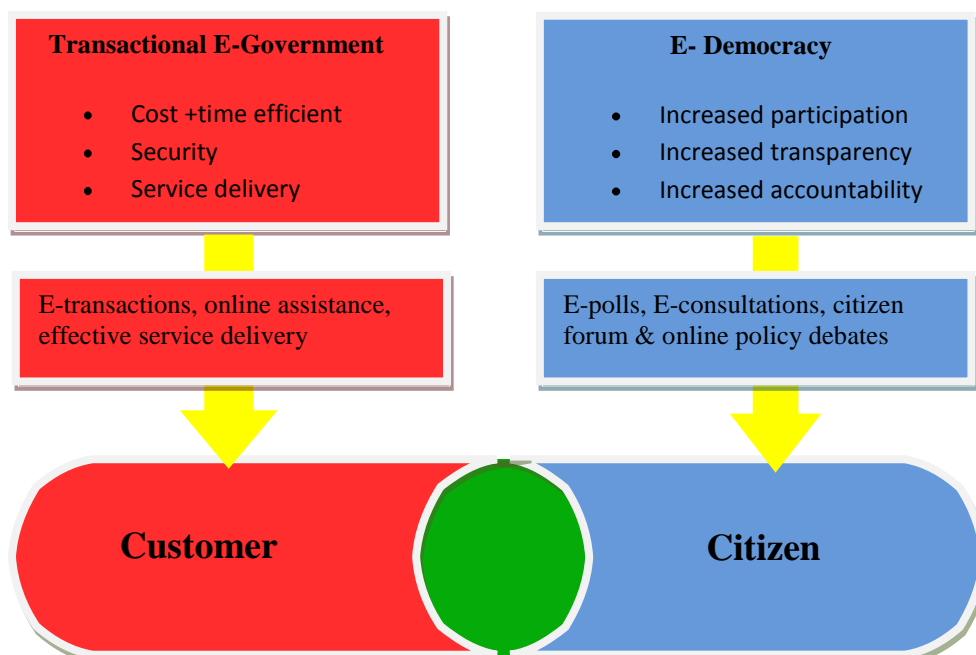

Figure 1: Relationship between government portal and user

European policy is contributing to a restriction of e-government to service delivery in that success in a member state is measured by how cost effective the service is, not whether citizens feel more engaged with their government; for example "Electronic invoicing in Denmark saves businesses there 50 million euros per year, with administrations saving another 120-150 million euros" (Reding: Europe's Information society webpage, 2007). Although this is undoubtedly a success story, there is no mention of examples of better e-democracy such as Estonia where democracy is seen

as being "as close to real-time as it gets" (Boyd, 2004). The UK government needs to widen its scope of e-government with an equal focus on e-democracy. Whilst e-government has focused on faster and more efficient public service, it is imperative that e-democracy must be incorporated to improve trust and transparency (Centeno et al, 2005). As Bangemann (Bangemann Report, 1994) had foretold, the information society revolution has indeed changed the way we work and live with individuals increasingly utilizing email and the internet as part of their daily lives. However, if the current emphasis on cost efficiency and citizen as consumer continues, it remains to be seen whether this revolution can change fundamentally the way citizens interact with their government.

6. Conclusion

E-government is viewed by the UK government as "improving the business of government" (UK White Paper: 1999). This is a narrow ambition meaning, "the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees" (Deloitte 2000). Against this, Directgov has had some success and continues to develop. Some transactions have been incorporated fully into Directgov yet there is an inconsistent approach between departments with many still requiring lengthy forms to be printed. However, analysed against e-democracy Directgov fails to engage citizens with government in a meaningful way. The website does not give any opportunity to comment on policy and simply displays information with little interactive content.

Fortunately for the UK there is still time for the government to address these failures and implement e-democracy features before citizens become disillusioned about the transition to the web. Much has been made of the UK government's outline for "Transformational Government". It remains to be seen whether the government will prioritise e-democracy over the allure of reducing costs. Citizen-government interaction is indeed changing. As former Prime Minister Tony Bair (2005) said, "This process can either overwhelm us, or make our lives better and our country stronger. What we can't do is pretend it is not happening." Currently the U.K. government is defining this change in a very narrow sense whilst pretending that the potential for e-democracy is not there. In the first Transformational Government annual report (2006) it was made clear the priority is to improve "customer-centric services", a narrow ambition; the aim should be for citizen-centric service. Overall, Directgov is disappointing as it does not realise the latent potential of the web to re-engage the citizen with government. As the portal currently sees the citizen primarily as a consumer, in the UK the promised revolution in government-citizen interaction so far has been more equivalent to the transition from a shop-till operator to self-service supermarket. The fundamental reality is little more than "providing an electronic suggestion box where government structures the interaction and dominates the process" which means little has changed over its predecessor portal (Leith and Morison, 2002). Both UK government, and more widely, European Union policy need to change towards giving emphasis to prioritising e-democracy initiatives and ways to improve the democratic process.

It is recommended that projects such as e-voting pilot schemes should be prioritised as online transactions. Only when Directgov opens up to provide for genuine unfettered citizen debate will it become the dominant form of citizen-government

interaction. At the very least, equal resources should be allocated to improving both the narrow and broader functions of e-government: thus, increasing online transactions whilst piloting e-voting or a citizen policy forum. Singapore and Estonia are managing to do both and in the process have raised the bar for e-government. It is now up to larger nations to implement SinGov's ideas; only then in the context of plurality of political options can the true potential of e-government be realised.

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