

PREFACE

This is perhaps one of the most interesting times in history to be alive. We are witnessing a phenomenal abundance of change in societies around the world in a very short period. The source of most of this change is new technologies and the Internet. In the past decade we have seen every aspect of the lives of individuals and organisations go through many evolutions and uncertainties. Large, medium and small corporations alike have discovered the need to adapt to the new technologies, or sink in the emerging global knowledge economy. There is no facet of life in the industrialised world that has not undergone some form of shift. The resultant new information economy has brought with it different approaches to work. There has been a surge in tele-workers, entrepreneurs and home run business. Corporations have downsized and knowledge workers migrate from company to company, open to the highest bidder and the organisation with the best deal. The highly proficient, intelligent and innovative knowledge worker is in demand. Knowledge itself seems to have become a commodity in the marketplace of ideas. The pace of change has been so dizzying to some they have difficulty in meeting the challenges these shifts have brought.

Nowhere has this been more evident than with government, who constantly are having to cope with the persistently emerging new technologies and demands from citizens. In today's wired world the interactive citizen is one of the fundamental cornerstones of change. As will be seen in the following chapters, the Internet has put new power into the hands of the citizen. Governments can no longer simply be dispensers of information, even in sophisticated forms being developed by many governments. But governments have not been passive observers and are rising to many of the challenges. New technologies are being used not only to deliver services to the public but to enhance government administration and facilitate businesses.

This publication looks at the means by which some governments are moving to electronic governance. In this context *governance can be seen as both a means of using new technologies to deliver services to the citizen, and ways in which to change and improve the efficient methods of administration within governments themselves.* The focus of the publication is in the electronic delivery of services. Another element discussed in the publication is *how governments will increasingly be able to involve citizens in the democratic process of government.*

At this stage of development few governments have effectively been able to involve their citizenry electronically in the democratic process. Many governments have been effective dispensers of information, which often passes as a means of enhancing the democratic process. There are many government initiatives seeking to help citizens to get on-line, seek feedback on government reports on-line, and develop listservs and discussion groups to elicit the views of the citizens. There are also many groups actively participating in on-line activities in the hope of influencing government policies. But for the most part, governments are far behind the activities of citizens on-line around the world. Those actively engaged in on-line activities involving social or political changes see the Internet as a medium to foster, enhance and change the way people have traditionally engaged in the democratic process.

The story of the Internet and electronic democracy is a cautionary tale. Much of the enthusiasm and hope for new forms of democracy and citizen input into public issues, sound very much like the gushing optimism expressed about the potential of television in its nascent years. It is not yet known if the potentials offered by the Internet will be met. Will the Internet become like television, an arid desert with only a small oasis of excellence? This is an important question because the potential is there for the Internet to become dominated by a few large, corporate interests, or subsumed by government regulation that could inhibit the freedoms offered by this new technology. There is also the danger in a recent trend indicating that people are increasingly spending more time in isolation sitting in front of their computer terminals.

A recent survey of 4,113 adults conducted by Stanford University's Institute for the Quantitative Study of Social Sciences found that "55 percent of Americans have access to the Internet at work or at home, and approximately 20 percent of regular Internet users spend more than 5 hours a week on-line. Of those 20 percent, 13 percent spend less time with family and friends, 8 percent attend fewer social events, and 25 percent spend more time working at home in addition to spending a full day at the office. The findings of the study also support the assertion that Americans are abandoning traditional forms of mass media, such as newspapers and television, in favour of the Internet."¹ There is wide potential of change here for the way people will interact as a society as the Internet continues to grow.

Suffice to say, at the moment the Internet is creating major change both positive and negative. One of these changes is in the ways citizens are

engaging in the democratic process and beginning to slowly alter the face of democracy. This publication looks at some of the initiatives and the reshaping of the face of democracy which on-line citizen participation is bringing.

The first part of this book deals with mechanisms that different governments are using to develop electronic governance initiatives. Countries looked at here are the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Malaysia and Hong Kong.

There is also a section on privacy, which shows that the massive amount of data collection, sharing, amassing and usage by the private sector represents a fundamental threat to the personal information of individuals who go on-line. The conclusion is that there is a need for an International Privacy as a Human Right Convention to protect citizens in the wired world.

The final section of the book analyses the state of electronic democracy on-line, the directions electronic of democracy is taking, where government stands in these developments, and how on-line activism is changing the shape of democracy as we have known it.