

## Editorial

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# *Information Polity*: A journal with much to achieve

In the statement of Scope and Aims that was drawn up one year ago as this new journal was launched, we boldly declared that *the journal is both international and comparative in its perspectives and welcomes articles from scholars and practitioners throughout the world*. In our first year, and into only our third substantive edition, we have been astonished by the way in which this particular aim has been realised. With only modest advertising we have thus far attracted multiple proposals and full articles from four northern European countries, from two southern European countries, from two Scandinavian countries, as well as from the US, South Africa, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand.

In part, this success is a function of one of the focal points of the journal itself, the pervasive information infrastructure through which, in this case, scholars and practitioners communicate worldwide. Just as we research and consult on the electronic networks of the information polity, so too we make use of academic and practitioner electronic networks ourselves. Our contributors have of course become aware of the journal through their use of the same technologies that they write about.

In large part too it is clear that the other substantive focal points of this journal – democracy and government – are ones that many academics and practitioners are working in and, as they do so, are increasingly confronting, and working with, the environment of ICT, including the Internet.

For those reading this journal and sending it articles it is almost unthinkable that studies of contemporary government or democracy can be undertaken without appreciation and inclusion of issues relating to information and communication and, thereby, of media that enable them to flow. Yet so much in the fields of public administration, political science and public policymaking continues to proceed as if the ‘information polity’ and broader ‘informatisation’ perspectives had not emerged. Journals in our fields remain replete with articles that purport to analyse contemporary change management programmes in government, or look at complex network theories in order to explain new modes of governance, or offer up analyses of modern democracy. Yet they do so in by far the majority of instances without reference to these perspectives that are so central to those who read and contribute to *Information Polity*. This is an intellectual mismatch that must be addressed. It is one to which this editor will return from time to time.

In this particular issue we demonstrate once more, through the quality of contributions, the reasons why information and its communication within democratic and governmental settings, together with the associated technologies, are an essential focus of study if we are to contribute in the heartland of so many contemporary debates about government and democracy. We also demonstrate the international focus of the journal again with contributions from The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Australia. I am delighted to be publishing these articles.

The first two articles offer profound reflections on the state of democracy in the information society, though from two distinctly contrasting perspectives. Paul Frissen’s theorized polemic presents a post-modern perspective on the information society. He argues that ICTs catalyse broad social changes;

changes that in their turn then magnify already extant flaws in the ways in which representative democracy functions. Representative democracy takes numerous forms, each of them affected deeply by three patterns of change that are embedded within the information society; these are horizontalisation, de-territorialisation and virtualisation. It is this context that leads Frissen to argue that representative democracy as ‘constitution’, with its emphasis upon the citizen and citizen organizations and upon the development of the republican *citoyen*, is most relevant in the information society. Representative democracy as ‘constitution’ enables us also to rediscover the importance to the citizen of necessary checks and balances for, Frissen contends, parliamentary sovereignty cannot guarantee those checks or balances in a postmodern pluriform, citizen-centred state. *“In the information society, parliamentary democracy will be only one among many kinds of representation. Appeals to the democratic primacy are in vain . . .”*

Mark Bovens and Eugène Loos are as concerned with legal rights and new forms of governance within democracy as they are with politics and democracy. They offer an intriguing metaphor for understanding both the history of state [re]formation as well as the transformation ‘digital state’. Their metaphor is one of *“an edifice to which new storeys and rooms have been added and furnished over the course of centuries”*. Such additions and furnishings are occurring now as we go through the latest transition of the constitutional state, one that accompanies the transition from an industrial to an information society. Whilst minor repairs suffice in some instances, in others more radical innovations are required. And, as with Frissen, they argue that the need for these more radical innovations derives from new societal features, including de-territorialization and horizontalisation and, additionally, the search for new forms of transparency. Thus, the edifice that is fit for the 21st century has a new top storey, one that houses both ‘information rights’ and ‘transparency’.

Most interestingly in both of these first two articles is the agreement that the era of uniform parliamentary democracy, functioning as the center-piece of the polity, is over. The checks and balances that were provided by a parliament-centric democracy must be superseded by new forms of governmental transparency on the one hand and new information rights on the other. Bovens and Loos provide a vital building block in the edifice that both they and Frissen create. The checks and balances needed in Frissen’s ‘anarchist republic’ are supplied by Bovens and Loos through a judicious combination of new rights and new forms of openness.

The contribution from Stephen Ward and his colleagues Wainer Lusoli and Rachel Gibson provides a grounded study of one element of democracy in action within the information polity, that of the UK’s Liberal Party membership. In essence they ask whether the Internet is widening and/or deepening participation within the party, thereby contributing to the much sought after reinvigoration of mainstream democratic expression and activism. Having surveyed more than 2000 party members, they conclude in ways that run counter to so much of the industry-inspired inspissated technological determinism of the information age. It is doubtful that ICTs alone, they say, *“can reverse the long term trend of declining membership”*. And, on the ‘deepening’ part of the thesis, they further conclude that the Internet is stimulating stronger forms of activism only amongst those who are already active and not amongst those more passive members.

Whilst Stephen Ward and his colleagues demonstrate how their research findings cut away from the rhetorical grain of information age hype, exposing, as they do so the rhetoric/reality gap, Dave Griffin and Eddie Halpin’s evidence points to the emergence of significantly changing roles amongst UK local authorities as they adapt to the potential of ICT. Griffin and Halpin’s empirical work centers upon a representative sample of 30 local government websites and the latter’s ability to support local citizens working through information intensive, cross-cutting ‘life episodes’. They find that local governments

are adapting, some more strongly than others, in offering value added 'joined up' government to their citizens. They also conclude, however, that there is still a long way for local governments to travel in this respect before they can claim to be full-blown 'digital intermediaries'.

Finally, in this edition Julian Teicher and Nina Dow provide a case study of Australian e-government. Their conclusions, drawn from extensive research, once more echo the findings of so many other academic researchers as they demonstrate the sub-optimal and uneven developments that fall under the label of e-government. Joined up, ICT-facilitated government, they conclude, remains a distant ideal rather than the instantly attainable outcome of expressed political and administrative will.

There remains much for those interested in researching the information polity to achieve. Success stories of information age government and democracy are few; achievements are generally partial at best. Most often, findings point to high levels of failure to achieve the heady promises that have been attached to the application into government and democracy of ICTs and the new media.

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