

# Rethinking Government-Public Relationships in a Digital World: Customers, Clients, or Citizens?

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**ABSTRACT.** Many have argued that new electronic technologies have the potential to transform how governments relate to users of public services. This article explores the limits of e-government as it is being conceived by testing it against three service recipient models: customer, client, and citizen. We argue that despite the opportunities that electronically-based service transformations present for enhancing democratic citizen engagement and the power of clients, the market-inspired customer image is likely to emerge as the most powerful way in which service recipients are characterized and addressed. The business architecture of e-government being installed today in the pursuit of better customer relationship management may also represent a decreasingly attractive medium for client empowerment and democratic interactions between service recipients and government. doi:10.1300/J516v04n01\_06 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2007 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.]

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. . . there is no inherent link between successful e-government and strengthened democracy. (Coleman & Gotze, 2003, p. 6)

. . . even though the challenge of eliminating the “democratic deficit” is very different from the challenge of transforming the delivery of government services, there is evidence that the two are linked. (Government On-line Advisory Panel, 2003, p. 2)

### INTRODUCTION

The emergence of electronic government (or e-government) has brought with it a rhetorical flourish of promises to reinvent the business model of government on the one hand, and to redesign the institutional conduct of democracy on the other. Across the realms of service and democracy and how both are shaped by digital technologies, whether the public is viewed and treated as either a passive recipient of commoditized outputs or as an engaged partner in the design of services and policies is a central concern—one that is often foundational for subsequent planning and execution efforts.

This article is based on the premise that governments are pursuing increasingly digitized service transformation strategies that are based on a predominant ethos of the service user or recipient cast in the role of *customer*, with lessening regard for both *client* and *citizen* roles and the importance of differentiating between all three. We invoke the term *client* in reference to long term relationships between individuals and service providers where dependency and personal guidance are central purposes. *Citizen* refers to the conceptualization of the public as active and vocal participants in political deliberations about the design and delivery of government services. While specific sources and reasons for this confusion are dissected throughout this article, the underlying causation stems from the instantaneous and convenience-driven service culture associated with, and strengthened by the Internet, and the man-

ner by which large public sector organizations are increasingly judged through this performance prism that greatly accentuates speed and virtualization over more structured forms of engagement and deliberation. The result is that despite new opportunities that electronically-based service transformations present for genuinely enhancing democratic citizen engagement and the power of clients, it is the end-user, or customer, that is likely triumphant, potentially with insufficient holistic regard for the legitimacy, responsiveness, and performance of democratic governance.

Accordingly, our purpose here is twofold: first, to provide a rigorous conceptual exploration of this logic by drawing from both scholarly research and empirical observation (the latter primarily from Canada and other Parliamentary jurisdictions); and secondly, to help pave the way for a broadened agenda of digital transformation more encompassing of the multiple relational forms enjoining government and the public. In order to accomplish these tasks, this article is organized as follows. First, we probe three images of the service recipient—customer, client, and citizen: in the three sections that follow, we set out the provenance of each characterization, provide examples of the image as it is articulated by its key advocates, and analyze some key issues raised by a more vigorous pursuit of each model. We then look closely at the implications of the governance architecture of e-government for future relationships between governments and service recipients in section five. Finally, section six concludes by way of critical issues and future directions which, in our view, merit further thought and research.

### CUSTOMER SERVICE AND SERVICE INTEGRATION

The logic of customer-centric governance, rooted in private sector managerial practices, stems from an approach best captured by Osborne and Gaebler’s *Reinventing Government* (1992). Based largely on the experiences

of state and local governments in the United States, the book lauded efforts to create more decentralized managerial structures across a public sector and trumpeted efforts made in improving customer service outcomes via efficient organizational processes.

With respect to public administration, the term *agency* is central to the evolution of new public management (NPM) as a means of organizational restructuring within the public sector (Pollitt, Caulfield, Smullen, & Talbot, 2004). The UK's early pursuit of executive agencies in the late 1980s reflected the decentralizing flavor of NPM reforms: more autonomous and empowered units better able to serve their customer base in innovative ways, ideally freed from the shackles of centralized administrative control. Whereas the UK and New Zealand went furthest in embracing this agency-based mentality, the Canadian experience federally (and to a large extent provincially) consisted of some modest experiments during the late 1980s with so-called Special Operating Agencies, a status that continues to this day with federal bodies such as the Passport Office and Parks Canada.

Provincially, the creation of Service New Brunswick (SNB) is illustrative. SNB benefited from strong leadership giving the agency special status as a crown corporation headed up by a President empowered to pursue innovative management techniques both internally and externally (via partnerships with the private sector). At the same time, SNB has required the usage of a bolstered government-wide technology architecture (administered and maintained largely by central agencies) and a set of contracting mechanisms to work on behalf of individual provincial departments as their public interface, as well as in concert with municipal governments (Dutil, Langford, & Roy, 2005; Pardo, 2006). Borrowing what had then been an exclusively private sector practice, bodies such as SNB now routinely report annually on their financial and business performance as a means of demonstrating results (*ibid.*).

This business stylization reinforced the customer-service logic of public sector restructuring just as the Internet emerged as a powerful new venue for efficient and simplified transactional encounters in the marketplace (Eggers, 2005). Online banking and electronic

commerce captured the attention of early government proponents of electronic service delivery. Initiatives such as the annual e-government survey by Accenture Consulting explicitly emphasized the customer service dimension of public sector performance. Indeed, the growing reliance on private sector specialists to realize e-government reforms has reinforced the business mentality and often the placement of industry personnel within authority structures devoted to technology that have augmented in recent years, both in Canada and elsewhere.

### *Canada Revenue Agency*

The most significant example of a nexus of customer and technological reforms at the federal level in Canada has been the transformation of Revenue Canada from a traditional line department employing approximately 40,000 people into a uniquely specialized agency (the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency that has since become simply the Canada Revenue Agency, CRA). The experiment went much further than previous agency initiatives by formally segmenting political oversight and accountability (via a Minister) and managerial and operational responsibilities that have been uniquely and publicly vested in an appointed official (Chief Commissioner) who, in turn, accounts to a Board.

As it pursued its own business-inspired corporate governance model, Australia became an important benchmark for the CRA. For example, the creation of Centrelink in the 1990s represented Australia's flagship service improvement effort, reflecting its intention to inject a customer service mentality into its delivery operations, and to become much more technologically sophisticated in doing so (Vardon, 2000). The agency has since endured numerous growing pains in terms of governance structures, organizational culture, and performance outcomes, in part due to the managerial and political complexities of its set of client relationships in the realms of social assistance and human services (the distinction between customer and client is returned to below, along with further discussions pertaining to Centrelink).

In Canada, the CRA would prove no less influential in pursuing a customer-focused agenda,

one that would become well suited for online adaptation as Internet usage grew rapidly in the late 1990s. In fact, CRA became the Government of Canada's flagship performer in terms of online transactional services, with its highly successful e-filing initiatives, which offer individual Canadians the opportunity to file their tax return online, a channel that co-exists with others, notably traditional forms and telephone-based completion. The uptake of e-filing has recently surpassed the 50% mark of Canadian taxpayers, an impressive achievement reflecting not only convenience but also a growing level of public confidence in the security of infrastructure for doing so (for a document with considerable amounts of confidential information). Despite the rather unfriendly persona of CRA as a tax collector, as an agency it has made considerable effort to improve its customer service capacities, not only in terms of offering new online channels, but also with respect to benchmark response times to external inquiries (aligning benchmarks across service channel), to improve the knowledge and skills of front line staff, and to communicate its results in a business-like fashion with annual reports detailing both objectives and results (Roy, 2006a).

In parallel to CRA's efforts, the federal Government Online (GOL) initiative was first introduced in 1999 as an ambitious effort not only to move all government services online (a goal that was later revised to include all essential services), but also to repackage these service offerings in a more customer-friendly manner. Thus, the much lauded Government of Canada portal featured three clusters or service streams of distinct types of information and transactions (Canadians, Businesses, and the awkwardly named Non-Canadians, for potential visitors and new entrants). The creation of Internet portals with integrated service streams based on usage patterns such as life events (as opposed to departmental structures) further reflects a customer segmentation mentality, perhaps less rooted in NPM than its more recent cousin, the equally industry-oriented customer-relationship management (CRM). Today the literature on e-government and service reforms efforts is replete with references to CRM in the public sector, although more nuanced observers have made the point that citizenship orienta-

tion of government may hinder the appropriateness and applicability of business-style CRM in government, a theme further explored below (Schellong & Goethe, 2004).

The corresponding need for government-wide mechanisms to foster technical interoperability, information exchange, and coordinated managerial action can induce pressures for centralized authority that counter to some degree the initial flow of NPM away from the centre toward more autonomous, decentralized units (as demonstrated by examples such as CRA and Centrelink). The resulting need for a federated architecture is thus central to both integrating and coordinating service delivery capacities (Batini, Cappadozzi, Mecella, & Talamo, 2002). Horizontal coordination and service integration have thus become hallmark elements of e-government (Roy, 2006a).

### *Service Canada*

Service Canada was announced in the 2005 federal budget as one of the largest re-organizations of the federal public service in its history. Defining itself as a one stop provider of services to Canadians, the scope of this entity is presented as serving 32 million Canadians per year, employing over 20,000 staff, operating more than 320 offices (directly or via intermediaries), handling 14 million Web visits per year, and answering over 50 million calls per year. Its service charter pledges personalized (and bilingual—exploring over time, multilingual) service, while preserving the rights of Canadians to fair and unbiased service, a clear explanation of decisions, the opportunity to review any decision, and the security of private information. An Office of Public Satisfaction has been established to field input and feedback from the public, pledging to acknowledge this feedback and explain its usage in service improvements.<sup>1</sup>

Two central points are noteworthy here. First, Service Canada faces a considerable political and organizational undertaking in its quest for government-wide service integration (not unlike Service New Brunswick but on a much larger scale and far beyond the more limited human and social services scope of Centrelink in Australia). Secondly, although the Internet has become one option in a

multi-channel framework (unlike the online emphasis of GOL), Service Canada is inheriting the customer mantra of GOL and related service improvement initiatives that have generated considerable enthusiasm both within and outside of government (Roy, 2006b). For example, the annual *Citizens First* surveys of the Canadian public have demonstrated consistent increases in service quality ratings, such as Accenture Consulting has consistently ranked the federal government the world leader in their interpretation of e-government squarely focused on the public's role as the customer of government. Abandoning the ranking scheme in 2006 in favor of more qualitative findings from its global review, Accenture notes "that leading governments are introducing services on par with the best of the private sector" (Cuddihy, 2006, p. 2).

### ***STRUGGLING WITH CLIENT RELATIONS***

The term *client* is, at times, used as a contemporary synonym for *customer*. But it is possible to apply the term in a more careful manner to describe specifically those individuals who depend on assistance and support provided through government human and social service social systems. In many cases, users of these services are vulnerable and depend on the care, guidance and support provided by expert human service providers. These end-users often develop long term relationships with service providers, and the service relationship is often asymmetrical, especially where providers have the legal and professional authority to impose decisions and withhold supports. This asymmetry is exacerbated where service recipients lack, or are deemed to lack, certain emotional, intellectual, or physical capacities. The range of services that fall under this category of service delivery is very broad and includes health care; jails and penitentiaries; housing services; income assistance and employment support; public guardianship; social work services for children, families, and youth; special education programs; and various supports for persons with intellectual, physical and psychiatric disabilities. Perceived in this manner, the term *client* conjures up a host of complex ideas about democratic engagement, especially in

the context of contemporary e-government oriented service transformation.

In many countries, since the 1970s, there have been calls to democratize government human and social service delivery systems. The democratization of client-based service delivery places specific demands on service organizations. A critical condition is the development of partnership or collegiality between clients and workers (Hardina, 2005; Leon, 1999), which means that clients need to be directly involved in decision making about the design and production of services. This involves clients in more than just providing feedback to inform internal decision making. Closely related to this is the need for service provision to be structured in such a way that enables clients and workers to develop relationships of mutual understanding, respect, and trust, which requires that work is coupled in a client-centered way (that is, staff organize their work around their individual clients, not according to specialized functions) (Hubberstey, 2001; Leon, 1999; Skrtic & Sailor, 1996). Some authors argue that service must be integrated in order to be effective and to properly take into account the needs and priorities of the whole client (Hubberstey, 2001; Leon, 1999). However, others note that multiple entries or *pathways* are valuable, since they offer choices and service alternatives where one service deliverer has failed to work effectively with the client (Beresford & Holden, 2000).

Many commentators further argue that democratic service organizations must also be internally democratic: employees at all levels need to be included in decision making, to believe their judgment is valued, and to feel they have supervisory support to engage clients democratically. They must have discretion to deal flexibly with individuals (Yeatman & Owler, 2001), and they require additional administrative resources, including information technology, and more time and training in new techniques. Skrtic and Sailor (1996) argue that if human service organizations are to be responsive to their clients, they also need to develop internal adaptability and flexibility. They therefore reject both traditional machine bureaucracies and professional bureaucracies in favor of *adhocracy*, in which teams of staff col-

laborate and share information in order to build on the insights gained from practice.

### ***Australia's Centrelink***

While such client-centric orientations have often been overshadowed in recent decades by the customer mindset of the new public management (Sossin, 2002), their influence can be found in several contemporary initiatives. In Australia and the UK, the democratization of social service delivery is central to public service transformation strategies. As noted above, Centrelink is the Australian Government's flagship service delivery agency and has, since 1997, delivered integrated social services across the country. It aims to provide personalized service that is tailored to individual users' needs and to encourage choice and voice so that users can select from alternative services and negotiate program conditions (Vardon, 2000; Howard, 2003, 2006). The agency instituted several reforms, including the One-to-One Service Initiative and the Personal Adviser Program, to facilitate the development of ongoing relationships between service users and staff. Centrelink has also invested heavily in e-service delivery, through online information facilities and integrated data management, both of which facilitate rapid access to case information. The agency automated a number of front line activities, including the assessment of job seekers with special needs, as well as the management of referrals and client sanctioning procedures (Henman & Adler, 2003; Howard, 2003, 2006). These reforms also featured the NPM themes of funding reduction and expectations of efficiency improvements (Mulgan, 2003).

### ***Connecting Britain***

In its early years, the New Labour administration sought to differentiate its social service agenda from previous managerial reforms by pouring new resources into service delivery and by embracing the goals of social inclusion and participation as part of a broader concern with social disadvantage and marginalization (Barnett, 2002). Blair's recent promotion of *choice, voice and personalization* in the context of public service delivery is part of a strat-

egy to use service transformation to link the government's social inclusion and participation agendas into a broader model of democratic citizen engagement (Blair, 2006; Hutton, 2006).

A good example of this is the Connecting Britain e-government strategy, which seeks to contribute to improved computer literacy amongst digitally and socially marginalized citizens (United Kingdom, 2005). In contrast to many other Anglo jurisdictions, the UK rhetoric makes frequent mention of the need to empower and support front line staff. The Scottish Executive's 2006 *Transforming Public Services* strategy makes similar connections between the broad service transformation agenda and the specific needs of disadvantaged service users (Scottish Executive, 2006). The Scottish Government stresses several common themes, including one window service, community participation, the need to respond on an individual basis to the needs of clients, the importance of productivity and the potential for new technologies to facilitate the joining up of organizations, jurisdictions, and programs (Scottish Executive, 2006).

The association of client-centered service with mainstream service transformation agendas has aided the democratization of client service in these jurisdictions in several ways. While there is limited empirical research on the impact of recent service delivery reforms, both Australia and the United Kingdom have created formal structures to allow client input and to enhance user accountability, through complaints mechanisms, new appeal structures, legislated user-consultation requirements, and client-satisfaction research programs (Vardon, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2006). In both countries, new resources have been provided to human service delivery systems, in order to support greater attention to individual needs. Computer technology has also been used in Australia to streamline and automate several income support functions, resulting in more consistent and accurate application of rules as well as greater consistency and comprehensiveness of information: such improvements permit the agency to offer more effective multi-channel service delivery (Howard, 2006).

Along with the potential benefits of such automation have come new problems and ten-

sions, particularly for the organizational and managerial structures shaping relations between public servants and clients. In both Australia and the United Kingdom, the autonomy of many human service professionals has been reduced through attempts to codify and categorize the competencies they require to complete their work and to quantify and measure the outcomes of professional intervention. This has led in some contexts to a Taylorization of care work, which has enabled and in turn been reinforced by the automation of many functions, as well as the transfer of tasks from professionals to clerks (Foster & Wilding, 2000; Henman & Adler, 2003). It is likely that such changes have reduced the ability of local staff to respond to users' needs on an individualized basis, other things being equal. Though these trends are most visible in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, they have also been observed in several Canadian provinces (Baines, 2004). The recent shift in the UK towards a rhetorical emphasis on front line staff and their needs suggests some reversal of this trend (Blair, 2006).

### *Australian Job Network*

The tendency to impose transactional or market models of customer choice and exit on social services is illustrated in the Australian Job Network. In this NPM-inspired system, the government contracts with a collection of private and not-for-profit organizations to provide employment services for disadvantaged job seekers across the country. It deliberately funds multiple providers in order to encourage competition and choice. The government rewards providers financially when they place an unemployed client in a paid position. The providers have an incentive to park difficult cases and concentrate on those easiest to place (Considine, 2001). Furthermore, the time spent interacting and building relationships with clients has fallen since the introduction of the quasi-market for employment services in 1998. While there is evidence that the new system is more effective at placing job seekers in employment, this example illustrates some of the pitfalls of NPM-inspired models of social service reform from the perspective of democratization.

The institutionalized emphasis on easily measurable and quantifiable outcomes and the payment of rewards for performance has encouraged service providers to reduce the time they spend with users, and to focus on short term employment results, rather than working with clients to discover their individual needs and aspirations and to develop their abilities and skills (Considine, 2001). High levels of staff turnover undermine relationship building and are serious problems in public services such as Canada's, which are suffering poor morale as a result of periods of downsizing and continual political assaults on the legitimacy of government service provision (Bakvis, 2000). The focus on efficiency has encouraged the transfer of functions from trained care workers to untrained clerks, who are less likely to resist the commands and demands of superiors or to possess the skills to communicate and collaborate with vulnerable clients. Despite positive effects of computerization, such as internal information sharing for more integrated service offerings and the provision of significant amounts of information through online portals, automation has also empowered management at the expense of front line workers and service users, and has shifted the focus from intangible service outcomes to measurable outputs (Henman & Adler, 2003).

### *ENGAGING THE CITIZEN*

We now turn to an analysis of the challenges facing those who would exploit the potential of e-based service transformation to contribute to a broader strengthening of the democratic potential of service recipients and other individuals in the community as citizens. The most obvious starting point is that service recipients prefer to have themselves characterized as citizens. In a recent Government of Canada survey, for instance, 48% of respondents indicated that they prefer to be thought of as citizens when receiving services. Being thought of as a client (16%) or customer (13%) ranks far behind and even below the category of taxpayer (19%) (Ekos, 2006). These kinds of results are reinforced by more related national survey findings which indicate that 3 out of 5 Canadians want

more direct influence on government decision making between elections (Lenihan, 2002).

Many interesting questions arise from such findings. Who do such survey respondents include within the meaning of *citizen*? Would citizens actually take advantage of greater opportunities to be involved in government planning, decision making, implementation, and monitoring around service transformation? But, for our purpose, the central question is what it might mean to be characterized as a citizen in the context of engaging with government as part of a service transformation initiative.

Undoubtedly, the most robust citizen engagement model would be deliberative democracy. This model transcends the democratic opportunities contemplated by customer or client interaction models and sees service transformation as an opportunity to engage citizens (both affected and interested others) in a comprehensive dialogue (with service providers and other citizens) on the nature of the service being provided and the means being used to deliver it. From the democratic theory perspective, this model also transcends representative and pluralist models of democracy, contemplating participation opportunities beyond the information sharing and consultation activities available under the latter models (Norris, 2003). The OECD characterizes this as the *active participation* model, differentiating it from *information* and *consultation* relationships (OECD, 2001).

To qualify as active participative, deep, or deliberative, citizen engagement would have to be focused on formative dialogue about what to do rather than merely assertion of wants or needs in response to survey or focus group questions. Such engagement would also be based on comprehensive, balanced, and accessible information, taking place at points in time in which the agenda is still open to expansion and revision, and would use deliberative spaces and institutional arrangements that allow for an orderly interaction and collaboration without prejudice among the widest possible range of affected stakeholders (Coleman & Gotze, 2003, p. 6; Lukensmeyer & Torres, 2006, p. 7-10). Deliberative engagement at the front end would also extend into the implementation and accountability phases of the service transformation process, with citizens acting as smoke

sensors of the shortcomings of emerging integrated, multi-channel service arrangements.

Various governments and citizen-centered service advocates have signaled that more robust forms of citizen engagement should be part of the service transformation package. Unfortunately, the data on the degree to which governments at all levels are actually providing significant engagement opportunities as part of their e-government initiatives is spotty (Scott, 2006). In its e-government vision, the New Zealand government highlights the democratic potential of service transformation, indicating that the implementation of e-government will make it easier for people to have their say in government. The New Zealand service transformation vision references the opportunities for citizens to interact with ministry officials to affect policy, indicating that this will enhance participation and build public trust (New Zealand, 2000). Similarly, the UK Government recently outlined its plans for administrative transformation through new technologies, indicating that one of its performance objectives was that "citizens feel more engaged with the process of democratic government" (United Kingdom, 2005). This objective is reinforced—as noted above—by the dual strategy of *voice* and *choice* that is increasingly part of the service transformation debate in the United Kingdom (United Kingdom, 2006).

Similar claims are evident in the rhetoric of service transformation initiatives of governments across Canada. The Federal Government's Online Advisory Panel, for instance, made "engaging citizens more fully in governance processes, not just at election time, but throughout the governance cycle that runs from policy formulation to program planning, service delivery, and performance evaluation" one of the primary challenges of the federal e-government service transformation initiatives (Government On-line Advisory Panel, 2003). Many Canadian provincial governments have also recently made commitments to provide regularly updated information about patient wait-times across health care providers.

There are other cases of one-off experiments with electronic democratic engagement at the departmental levels of national and provincial level governments, but not all of the most prominent examples are directly related to service

transformation. The Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, for instance, hosted an online discussion forum as part of its 2003 foreign policy review. In another well documented case, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency created a substantial national online dialogue about its draft public involvement policy (Beierle, 2002). In the related world of regulation, the U.S federal government's e-rulemaking initiative is opening up the prospect of substantial online public engagement in the development of rules by federal agencies pursuant to legislation (Carlitz & Gunn, 2005; Shulman, 2005).

The opportunity for significant democratization seems strongest to some in circumstances in which voluntary sector organizations are involved in the new service delivery mix. The findings of the Edelman trust barometer, which measures public opinion on matters of institutional trust across a range of countries (Edelman, 2006) can be instructive in this regard. They demonstrate that whereas both industry and government have suffered from a decline in perceptions of legitimacy and trustworthiness in recent years, confidence in non-governmental organizations has risen sharply. One explanation for this rise is the more participatory nature of civil society organizations and evidence suggesting that in today's world, a key determinant of trust is that of a horizontal relationship between individuals and organizations, more peer-based, networked in nature and less rooted in deference to authority, hierarchy, and top-down design of services. It is arguable that service transformations that engage civil society organizations are likely to present affected individuals and groups with more opportunities (electronic and face-to-face) to interact in a democratic manner with service providers. By way of example, a *Crossing Boundaries* national consultation report draws attention to initiatives to bring local citizens into processes designed to create community consensus on what priorities and outcomes the community wants from public investment and programs (Hume, 2006).

Why would we even consider trying to hang such weighty forms of democratic engagement on what many observers might prefer to see as merely an efficient way to repackage public services for customers and clients? This is an

interesting question which merits careful consideration. The basic argument in favor of this vision of deep democratization of service transformation begins with the observation that most of the other democratic opportunities available to citizens within the Westminster form of representative democracy are severely compromised by forces such as executive domination, party propaganda, and the power of special interest groups. As a result, citizens increasingly shun traditional forms of democratic participation and their mistrust of political processes continues to grow. But, by necessity, citizens continue to avail themselves of state services and generally exhibit more positive attitudes towards service providers than politicians. Therefore, the reinvention of those services, even though conducted largely in a bureaucratic setting, provides a potentially powerful opportunity to engage the citizen as an important participant in the wider governance process.

The role of public servants as facilitators of deliberative democratic engagement is part of a long-established (if regularly suppressed) thread of public administration theory which sees public servants as proactive interpreters of the public interest (Kernaghan & Langford, 1990). Not only do public servants have motive, then, but they also have opportunity. The role of interpreting or balancing interests places obligations on public servants to consult closely with citizens—an obligation which is facilitated by their location at the nexus of electronic governance. Whatever the role of politicians in service transformation (and it is usually limited), it is public servants working out the details who control and make use of the contemporary tools of interaction such as the electronic town hall, the listserv, or interactive Web sites and games. Public servants run the ministry Web sites that provide information, report on results, and solicit the reaction of citizens to draft plans and results. Briefly, politicians lag behind public servants in adapting to the interactive potential of the Internet.

Thus, although some governments and citizen-centric service advocates show enthusiasm for deliberative democracy opportunities associated with service transformation initiatives, this type of public engagement faces serious

challenges. Five specific areas are worthy of explanation here.

First, while we can find some evidence of governments embracing more robust forms of democratic engagement in the course of service transformations, we can probably find more evidence of democratic rhetoric masking a customer approach to engagement. Being citizen-centered still does not mean comprehensively engaging the citizen in the design, implementation, and oversight of service transformations.

Second, if the increasing interactivity of service delivery did spill over into the provision of deeper democratic engagement in the design, development, implementation, and oversight of electronic service transformations, then we would have to pay closer attention to equality of access. The digital divide may be diminishing somewhat in many jurisdictions, but it can still create or perpetuate different levels of political influence. The evidence from some online dialogue initiatives is that they tend to be dominated by individuals representing the same organizations that would traditionally dominate policy debate in that sector (Beierle, 2002).

Third, despite some academic advocacy for a more proactive engagement role for public servants in the name of balancing interests and protecting rights, there is also a solid thread of contrary argument which insists that public servants should not be taking the lead in interacting with citizens when the dialogue moves beyond exchanging information and answering questions. Service transformation is often policy change by stealth. There is considerable anecdotal evidence from the front lines of service improvement of politicians feeling strong pressures to change policy to catch up with the demands of citizens and service providers who, after much interaction, share a collective vision of how a service should be transformed.

Fourth, the management of online dialogue for agencies in North America is increasingly being done by not-for-profit and private sector organizations offering asynchronous dialogue and networking tools parallel to those being supplied to service organizations by Customer Relations Management (CRM) firms. The challenge here is not to allow deliberative democratic engagement to become a commodity

purchased by service agencies and designed and moderated by third parties.

Fifth, research on service-based public engagement, both electronic and face-to-face, is still extremely rudimentary. This is an area in which more careful work is required to clarify the engagement intentions of service transformation initiatives and to document the reality and rhetoric associated with their implementation. In addition, such research would provide an opportunity to determine the degree to which the increase in citizen trust and confidence in government which service improvements appear to generate (Heintzman & Marson, 2005) is affected by the level of citizen engagement in the service transformations themselves.

### ***LINKING SERVICE AND DEMOCRACY— A LOST OPPORTUNITY?***

The advent of the Internet and digital technologies is without doubt an important dimension of today's governance complexities and the range of customer, client, and citizen-based relationships at play. Whereas the notion of e-government began chronologically for most governments as an opportunity for online service delivery, embracing a customer-driven philosophy inspired by electronic commerce, it has also become increasingly apparent that such a direct transfer from the commercial to the political realm is simplistic and unworkable. The manner by which e-government has been pursued matters here: the fact that much of the technology management apparatus of the public sector is typically orchestrated for a customer service and communications mentality, as opposed to one more open to consultation and engagement, is an important factor.

What seems apparent from transformational efforts of the past decade is that although the advent of e-government has reinforced the logic of customer service interlinked with a widening CRM-NPM organizational nexus, the managerial and political implications of this nexus for the public sector are more complex. Regarding the political aspects of such changes, the rise of new aspirations from within the citizenry and new promises by government leaders for e-democracy and more innovative and direct forms of

public engagement is a case in point. It is difficult to find a government today that is not claiming to be pursuing opportunities for citizen engagement, many of which involve online channels and tools. Nonetheless, whether or not the business architecture being developed by governments to better deliver services to customers is suitable for new forms of engagement is questionable (Roy, 2006a).

The engagement of the service recipient can also be considered through this client prism, in terms of the manner by which the creation and extension (or contraction) of multiple delivery channels enables more autonomy or self-empowerment on the part of the public. This point may involve not only completing one-time, individual transactions with government providers, but also better managing and self-governing one's personal and public affairs in order to make more informed choices that can partially tailor government service offerings as an integrative system. The risk with such models of self-empowerment is that they may impose new costs and demands on disadvantaged service users, who have to acquire new skills in order to interact successfully with service delivery systems. Also, the growing enthusiasm for self-service, especially associated with e-delivery options, has the potential to marginalize the needs of those clients who need intensive personalized support.

Even across more mundane and routine transactional services, client-focused engagement and service personalization carries implications for how governments will maintain or alter the multiplicity of service delivery channels in the future. The UK transformational strategy highlighted above underscores service channel choice, for instance; yet over time, the value of such a range of offerings may erode or at least be challenged by the efficiency gains derived from incentives that augment online usage over other channels. Such a business case offers a potential nexus between customer and client considerations, and it is one that is consistent with the direction espoused by technology enthusiasts such as Bill Gates: "the ideal is to eventually eliminate the non-electronic ways of doing things by making sure that as you go into a service center somebody guides you through doing it in the automatic way or simply that you make it so simple, so pervasive that

everybody is going to work that way" (Gates, 2006, p. 1).

While the business case and the private interest of the world's largest operating systems and software company are self-evident, it is possible to make the link to the realm of citizen relations here if one believes that both economic and democratic prospects are increasingly likely to be interwoven with online venues and skill sets. At the broadest and most holistic level of democracy, the Internet has ushered in a plethora of hope and rhetoric for online engagement and renewal. Are there political benefits to be derived from a citizenry conducting its public services online, thereby being more likely to welcome online channels in democratic affairs?

There are complications. Cherney (2000), for instance, asserts that the choice revolution underpinning the expansion of information and the empowerment of individuals (perhaps at the nexus between customer and client dimensions to the preceding discussions) may also render democracy a mere choice among many—particularly for younger generations increasingly gravitating to online activity. While not necessarily negative in all respects, Cherney sees a precarious future for political engagement if democracy is left to compete in such a manner, framed as a mere choice, and by extension, one framed more through the prism of customer than that of citizen, which carries with it some broader element of duty and responsibility (*ibid.*).

Moreover, democracy remains a contested notion, even within jurisdictions committed to it, meaning that there is little consensus as to how electronic channels can or should be deployed to improve its performance. Shane contrasts the potential for democracy online across three well-established schools of thought, each implying a very different role for the public as well as elected representatives and the manner by which each interacts and contributes to governance: election-center, direct, and more deliberative models of democracy. Acknowledging electronic potential across all three, Shane concludes that any meaningful strategy for democratic renewal based partly on online capacities must encompass all three schools—just as our present institutional arrangements do currently albeit with mixed levels of success and emphasis across jurisdictions (Shane, 2004).

In Canada, this type of transversal imposition of new technological capacities is not very far along, due in large measure to the customer-centric flavor of e-government and service transformation. Although this characterization is somewhat looser federally, where some democratic experimentation has begun to appear, the emphasis of the past few years, as argued above, has been on a positively portrayed correlation of customer service and political trust (Heintzman & Marson, 2005). Yet, much as this paper has argued that there are multiple roles involving the public's interactions with governments, so too are there surely multiple forms of trust: a distinction that helps explain why, for example, the Government of Canada can score highly on service performance while suffering from eroding levels of political confidence and legitimacy (Roy, 2006a).

Another challenging dimension of new democratic engagement opportunities involving online channels is the manner by which these opportunities involve more or less collaboration across different levels of government (Gibbons, 2004). As the customer logic fuels visions of a more seamless, monolithic public sector, the relational and policy aspects of both client and citizen relationships continue to rely more greatly on jurisdictional separation. This separation is important in not only placing boundaries around the highly complex transformations of specific service architectures of each government (i.e., the 311 strategies of cities, e-health prototypes provincially, and specific federal service streams such as tax filing, census completion, passport applications, etc.), but also in clarifying the lines of political accountability between governments and their respective citizenries as more clustered and integrated service streams emerge.

### **CONCLUSION— THE NEED FOR HOLISTIC DESIGN**

Based on a review of key practices and compelling arguments, we conclude that there is a danger of inappropriate fusing of objectives and means within the rubric of service transformation, and that the design of sustainable and legitimate e-government service delivery is being impaired. In part, this is

due to an accelerating technological determinism. The engagement implications of this trend are serious and potentially harmful, as Internet connectivity becomes increasingly common and influential across markets and societies, as well as within the public sector. There are important consequences to be derived from this conclusion, framed here as three strategic directives in terms of what governments must do in order to pursue a more balanced path of service transformation and governance renewal.

*The first directive is that the lens of service transformation must be widened, making it more encompassing of customer, client, and citizen perspectives on both objectives and means. As we have noted, this practice has already been applied within discrete parts of Canada's public sector, but overall there remains a dominant tendency to see customer service as the central rubric of public trust and service delivery. The essential role of elected representatives and political leadership is crucial here: in either facilitating openness to, or rather showing aversion to more power-sharing and relational flexibility that is implied by client and citizen relationships.*

*The second related directive is the need to begin to think more about technology usage and innovation across each sphere, and to determine whether or not there are separate technical and organizational requirements across each one. To date, the internal logic of e-government as online service, emphasizing business-type CIO structures within the executive branch, has produced some benefits, albeit within the customer lexicon. More dubious is the notion that such architecture can suffice in overseeing technological innovation and integration across the client and citizen dimensions of democratic governance, which are a good deal more complex organizationally and politically.*

*The third directive entails innovation with respect to both governance design and stakeholder participation. Three key sub-themes that must be addressed include: (a) public sector employee responsibilities and workplace relationships both within and between government agencies; (b) the private sector's role and partnering capacities between industry and government (entailing not only procurement*

reforms but also ongoing relational capacities to oversee and guide joint governance mechanisms); and (c) most broadly, an institutional openness to dialogue on appropriate yet novel governance mechanisms and performance measures in political and organizational settings that is more dependent on networked patterns of power-sharing and decision-making and correspondingly less rooted in hierarchy and control (Entwistle & Martin, 2005).

These directives widen the transformative potential of e-government in two ways: first, by enabling more accurate and nuanced conceptualizations of service agendas now underway; and secondly, by allowing for a correspondingly differentiated set of empirical approaches to identifying and measuring outcomes. Promising future research avenues thus include: (a) the relationship between leadership, visibility, and decision-making style in the executive branch and the relative focus on customer, client, and citizen-oriented outcomes that result; (b) the usage of digital technologies in the legislative branch and a similar inquiry in terms of relative focus on outcomes; (c) empirical cases of new networking styles of decision-making enjoining organizational units within the public sector and across sectoral boundaries (such as industry and government) and the role of new technologies in facilitating these styles (and resulting outcomes); and (d) more comparative research on the manner by which the impacts of digital technologies on the inter-relationships (and sorts of relationships) between the public and government may vary across jurisdictions and governance models (i.e., Presidential versus Parliamentary systems, for example). In sum, researchers, policy-makers, managers, and the public (as service user and voter) must become more sensitive to the meaning and usage of customers, clients, and citizens in order to more effectively pursue the co-development and positive alignment of service delivery, democracy and citizenship, and today's rapidly evolving digital infrastructure.

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