

# Notes For A Speech to the Canadian Newspapers Association

By Arthur Kroeger  
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*The great electronic leap forward of the 1990s is going to make it even harder for the machinery of democracy to remain in its present steam engine stage.*

The Economist

If any of my friends were told that I had decided to make a speech about the impact of the Internet on governance, they would be incredulous. Among present and former officials in Ottawa, I am one of the least electronically minded. Some years ago at a meeting in one of my departments, I remarked at one point, somewhat defiantly, that I still wrote with a wet nib pen. One of my officials was heard to mutter to his neighbour, with the deference that I had come to expect of my senior staff, "that's because his secretary refused to go on cutting quills for him".

So you would be correct to assume that, if I have chosen to talk to you about the Internet, I must have concluded that it was really important. I don't know much about electronics, but I have a long-standing interest in governance, and it seems to me that the interaction between the two is going to produce some far-reaching results. Modern communications have already produced major changes in the functioning of governments, and the Internet promises to take us to the next stage.

When I was growing up on a farm in eastern Alberta during the 1940s, we did not know what an old-growth forest was, we had never heard of Kosovo, and if you asked us what we thought of Premier Manning's speech in the legislature you would have been greeted with a blank look. We also weren't too sure what our MPs did when they went down to Ottawa, but we knew it must have been important because they all came back wearing suits.

The contrast with the present needs no elaboration, with wars, natural catastrophes, and Parliamentary proceedings being beamed into our living rooms by the hour. The significance of this phenomenon for governance derives from the fact that information stimulates reactions. People respond to what they learn, and they look for ways to express themselves, to make themselves heard. There is a direct correlation between the spread of television in the last three or four decades and the rising demands for what is known as participatory democracy.

I want to quote from an article by an American public official and thinker, Harlan Cleveland:

*Knowledge is power, as Francis Bacon wrote in 1597. So the wider the spread of knowledge, the more power gets diffused. For the most part individuals and corporations*

*and governments don't have a choice about this; it is the eluctable consequence of creating - through education - societies with millions of knowledgeable people.*

*We see the results all around us, and around the world. More and more work gets done by horizontal process - or it doesn't get done. More and more decisions are made with wider and wider consultation - or they don't "stick".... A revolution in the technology of organization - the twilight of hierarchy - is already well under way.*

That was written in 1985, and everything that has happened since has confirmed the accuracy of the diagnosis.

One of the impacts of an informed public has been a variety of measures intended to de-bureaucratize government. Centrally directed, rule dominated, inflexible bureaucracies are simply no longer tolerated, and governments in many countries have been forced to develop new ways of dealing with the public.

In the UK, over 75% of what was once the Civil Service is now working in "Executive Agencies", which operate under a contractual relationship with their respective Ministers. These agencies are free from some of the rigidities that characterize traditional departments, and are intended to deliver a more flexible and responsive service to the public. Other experiments with new models are to be found in New Zealand, Australia, the U.S. - even in France, which has long been one of the most centralized countries in the world.

Governments in Canada have been more hesitant about wholesale re-structuring, although the creation of three major new agencies in the areas of food inspection, parks, and revenue collection are of some significance. On the other hand, they have moved more aggressively than any country I know of in the consolidation of service delivery by different levels of government.

The Burlington Resource Centre has brought together the delivery of income support and social services programs by officials of the Regional Municipality of Halton, the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, and the federal Department of Human Resources Development. In Winnipeg a "single window" has been established for the delivery of some 50 aboriginal programs by the municipal, federal, and provincial governments. Similar examples are increasingly to be found all across the country. Such developments represent a shift in mind-set from governing to serving; the term "client centered" is increasingly heard. In the federal government there is now a program of annual awards for imaginative approaches to improving service delivery.

All of this would no doubt meet with nods of approval from any audience. There is however an underlying difficulty that merits attention.

For de-bureaucratization to work, it has to be accompanied by a degree of de-politicization. Giving officials more autonomy does not just mean freeing them from the dictates of the Financial Administration Act and the Public Service Employment Act. It also requires an ability to work out accommodations with contending local groups, and to tailor programs and operational

decisions to meet local conditions. On the other hand, Ministerial accountability in the traditional sense requires central direction and control. It is compatible with flexibility and local responsiveness, but only up to a point. To the extent that decisions have to be referred back to Ottawa to ensure that they won't get the Minister a hostile question in the House or create an adverse reaction in the Atlantic caucus, the ability to tailor operations to local circumstances will be circumscribed.

The problem may be more acute in Canada than in some other countries, because of the attention that is given at political level to matters of an administrative and/or local nature, particularly during the daily Question Period in the House of Commons. We have got past the point where the local MP determined where the local post office was to be sited, but not by much. A possible explanation is the strength of regionalism in our country.

The problem of reconciling on-site decision making with central direction is one that officials have lived with for some time. What is now bringing the problem to the forefront, however, is the rapid spread of the Internet and e.mail, which are the subjects to which I now wish to turn. At the beginning of the 1990s, very few Canadians were connected to the Internet. By 1997, some 5 million were; in 1999 the figure was 13 million. A similar trend is evident in the U.S. and, to a lesser degree as yet, Europe. The effect on governance of this rapid spread is just beginning to emerge, but what is already evident provides food for thought.

In 1995, the federal government established a primary internet site as a sort of single window through which it could disseminate information to the public. What was not widely foreseen at the time was that before very long the public would begin to use the site to talk back. It became an instrument of two-way communication, and was used by the public to express views on a wide range of issues.

The year before, Health Canada had established a web site as an informal self-help resource for the public which could also be used by health practioners to obtain information. It too became a forum for debate. A departmental proposal that would have limited the availability of unpasteurized cheese triggered an avalanche of postings. At about the same time, Justice, National Defence, and a number of other departments also began experimenting with various forms of interaction through web sites.

Today, some 190,000 members of the Public Service are on e.mail. Across the government, officials are groping for ways of working with a medium that by its very nature is not amenable to control. Because of a lack of experience, there is little in the way of rules or established guidance. Traditional forms of public consultation have evolved over the past century or longer. Within government, the Internet is four years old.

Lest anyone think that what we are seeing is a passing phenomenon, let me quote to you a passage from the speech from the Throne in October:

*The Government will become a model user of information technology and the Internet. By 2004, our goal is to be known around the world as the government most connected to its citizens, with Canadians able to access all government information and services on-line at the time and place of their choosing.*

I know that the historical record of Throne Speech implementation is somewhat uneven, but I can tell you that this particular commitment, and the five year deadline, are being treated with the utmost seriousness by officials across the government.

The implications for our system of government and our institutions of representative democracy are worth spending some time on. It would be a mistake to regard the Internet as just another way of communicating with government. It would be more accurate, as one official has remarked, to think of it as a library, a news wire, a deliberation room, and a polling booth all rolled into one.

In late October I was asked by Canadian Policy Research Networks to chair a Round Table of some 25 officials who were in front line positions dealing with the impact of the Internet on government. I want to share with you some of the issues that were discussed:

- for officials to provide factual material in response to e mail inquiries is one thing, but what are they to do with communications having a policy content? Is it legitimate to enter into debate?
- polling indicates that the public regard 3-4 weeks as a reasonable interval for a response to a letter sent to government. The acceptable response time for e.mail came out at four hours. How can this be made to fit with a hierarchic system that requires three or four levels of clearances for a proposed response?
- the British now post the names and e mail addresses of their officials. Canada will shortly follow suit. What are the implications for the traditional anonymity of officials, and for the role of Parliamentarians as intermediaries with the public?
- the Internet has been described as an instrument where everyone does the talking. The range of stakeholders can suddenly expand dramatically when an issue emerges. In response to mass talk, how does one organize to engage in mass listening?
- the private sector and the media make regular use of the Web to conduct surveys of public attitudes on various subjects. Is this an appropriate role for officials? If so, how should information so collected be used?
- does electronic dialogue change the concept of a citizen from being a consumer of government services to a partner in government?

Officials at our Round Table also saw a number of positive things about the new technology. There are many ways in which it can be used to foster dialogue by citizens, not only with government, but with each other in conjunction with government. It can also be used for multi-stakeholder consultations to arrive at ways of dealing with subjects on which there are divided views.

The Internet has also opened up new ways for the government to communicate directly with the public. Every government I ever worked for chafed at having its message "filtered" by the media. As one official has remarked, there is now more scope to write for the public rather than the Press Gallery.

Surveys done on behalf of the G-7 and the OECD indicate that most governments still see information and communication technology as a means of sending messages rather than receiving them. Many also attach a low priority to using web sites to acquire information.

The public however are of a different view. In Canada, an Ekos poll found that the Internet was regarded as one of the most useful tools to gather opinions. The public also see it as a way of making democracy work better. In my observation, when there is a divergence of this kind between the views of a government and the views of the public, the views of the public generally come to prevail. So the Internet as a major instrument of two-way communication is here to stay.

But if the coming of the Internet has faced officials with a number of new problems, it seems to me that the implications for our system of representative government are considerably more far reaching. In recent years, the Public Service has made serious efforts to modernize its dealings with an informed public, and a number of important operational and structural changes have resulted. However, as the previous Secretary to the Cabinet, Jocelyne Bourgon has observed, there is more to government than service delivery. Politics matters.

And to date, there have been relatively few changes in our political institutions and the way they conduct their business. It is as if our politics were frozen in amber, while all around the rest of the world has been evolving rapidly.

I find this puzzling. The great majority of the Members of Parliament I have known have been conscientious, hard working people who were trying to serve a public purpose as they saw it. They know that they are in trouble with the public, as poll after poll reveals the growing disrepute of politics and politicians, yet they appear at a loss to know what to do.

A major issue that needs to be addressed is how to reconcile contemporary demands for direct participation with traditional representative democracy. Some experts have raised the question of whether technological advances increase the scope for people to govern themselves. Traditional representative democracy is based on the premise that the views of voters need to be filtered through their elected representatives. This may well still be true. However, many of today's voters are just as well educated and just as well informed (thanks in part to the Internet) as their MPs and Ministers - and they know it. Consequently they are much less deferential and more assertive.

A particularly interesting question is whether the adversarial character of Parliamentary proceedings is increasingly out of step with the electronic age. Whatever the virtues of our political system, its primary purpose is not to work out solutions to problems. The public, on the other hand, want to use information and networks to engage in dialogue and to find ways of dealing with issues that concern them. This suggests that the future role of government and

people in it should increasingly be one of brokerage and facilitation rather than traditional combat.

My own view is that representative government continues to have an important role to play, provided it is capable of evolving. The formation of public policy requires more than keeping count of the number of e mail hits on a web site. The public are going to be heard from in new ways, whether anyone likes it or not, but at the end of the day there will still be a need for judgement, for a weighing of alternatives - i.e., for the traditional attributes of a government that is responsible in more ways than one.

I think most of the public are of a similar view. They want representative government to work, but they are dismayed by the feigned indignation and other theatrics that are increasingly at variance with how the public want issues dealt with. My comment at the end of that day of listening to the 25 officials at our Round Table was that we really should try to arrange a comparable forum for 25 Members of Parliament. They stand to be impacted even more than officials by rapidly emerging trends, and it is not too soon to address possible ways of meeting the future.

As a concluding comment, there is not a lot of scope for certainty about the questions that face us, if only because of the speed with which changes are taking place. It is however clear that relations between publics and governments have been transformed in the past two or three decades by the advent of mass communications and the resultant growth of well informed populations. Moving to the present day, I think it is no exaggeration to say that the coming of the Internet and e mail may well have an effect on democracy comparable to that of the progressive extensions of the franchise in 19th century Britain from the landed classes to the general population.

To cope with what we are facing will require flexibility, imagination, and a capacity to respond to rapidly evolving conditions. Our Public Service has made serious efforts to modernize itself in response to a transformed world, and has some significant successes to its credit. I hope that before long we will begin to see a comparable evolution on the political side.