

The Internet, Organisational Change and Community Engagement: The Case of Birmingham City Council¹

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ABSTRACT *This article examines the extent to which the implementation of Internet technology by Birmingham City Council (BCC) is facilitating new forms of engagement with the communities it serves. The case study presented reveals BCC to be an organisation in complex, conflict-ridden transition. Networked uses of Internet technologies have resulted in shifts being made towards a new form of 'citizen-facing' organisation. However older, more traditional forms of hierarchical command and control persist. These are being sustained, in part, by adaptive uses of the same technologies that facilitate networking. Ultimately, this situation limits the extent to which new forms of community engagement have been achieved.*

Keywords: local government; local governance; community engagement; e-government; Internet; organisational change.

Introduction

As has been widely noted in the literature,² local government in the UK is currently experiencing a particularly rapid period of change, change which can be traced in the main to successive reform programmes mounted by central government. Although the roots of this state of 'apparent perpetual motion'³ can be traced back as far as the rise of Thatcherism in the late 1970s, the pace and magnitude of change in the sector has accelerated under New Labour. Whilst such dynamism means few commentators speak with certainty about the future of local government, the notion that councils should become far more effective in engaging their communities is a key characteristic of this current period of reform.⁴ Equally, it is clear that New Labour has identified the broad implementation of information and communications technologies (ICTs), and in particular the Internet, as a crucial part of this process. Innovative application of Internet technology has been heralded as key to local councils effectively engaging the broader community in decision-making and service delivery, and, under legislative pressure, each UK council has been forced to develop a website as part of a shift to 'e-government'.⁵

In drawing upon a case study of Internet use in Birmingham City Council (BCC), this paper investigates the extent to which the implementation of Internet technology facilitates greater community engagement in local government. BCC provides an interesting site for exploring these issues. It not only has a relatively long history in terms of engaging with Internet technology, having established its first website in 1994, but its recent revamp of this site resulted in it being assessed as one of the top 10 local government sites in the UK (being awarded the key accolade of ‘transactional’⁶). Whilst it is recognised that broader issues clearly matter to any analysis of Internet use by local government (as Kuk⁷ has shown in relation to UK councils’ electronic service delivery and local ‘digital divides’), the focus of this article is specifically on the *organisational* context of Internet use within BCC.

In concentrating on organisational issues, this analysis seeks to add to a broader research literature on the importance of institutional structures and processes to an understanding of technological change. Itself part of a broader array of research into the social shaping of technology (SST),⁸ this literature has a relatively long history.⁹ It has established the importance of factors such as managerial decision-making processes, cultural norms and beliefs, and operating routines in terms of shaping the ways in which technologies are implemented and develop. This approach has been usefully applied to governmental organisations in a number of analyses.¹⁰ However, in a book-length study which examines the interaction between organisational dynamics and the implementation of ICTs, Jane Fountain’s *Building the Virtual State* provides one of the richest accounts of how organisational factors impact on current debates over e-government.¹¹ In an approach that echoes elements of Dutton’s¹² analysis of the social shaping of ICTs, Fountain develops a ‘technology enactment framework’ in which she distinguishes between *objective technology* and *enacted technology*. The difference between the two revolves around Fountain’s treatment of information technology as ‘endogenous’—as always being ‘transformed in the process of being designed and used’.¹³ Thus, information technology and organisational/institutional¹⁴ arrangements become connected reciprocally:

Institutions and organisations shape the enactment of information technology. Technology, in turn, may reshape organisations and institutions to better conform to its logic. New information technologies are enacted—made sense of, designed, and used (when they are used)—through the mediation of existing organisational and institutional arrangements with their own internal logics and tendencies.¹⁵

With an overall aim of interrogating BCC’s evolving patterns of Internet facilitated community engagement, this article focuses on the dual theoretical themes Fountain describes. That is, if the Internet as a tool for community engagement in local government is to be fully understood, it is argued that full account must be taken of how the use of Internet technology interacts with the established organisational dynamics of local government.

First, the methodology used to investigate BCC is briefly outlined, and then the results of the research are presented. This initially involves tracing BCC’s responses to New Labour’s modernising agenda—which have seen the organisation adapt to a fundamentally new role as a ‘community leader’. Next, in light of this change, BCC’s use of Internet technology is discussed, with particular attention paid to the redevelopment of BCC’s website (www.birmingham.gov.uk) to bring it more in line

with the modernising agenda. This analysis will highlight that BCC has sought to utilise the Internet to facilitate community engagement in two main ways. First, by using the technology to open up new 'electronic channels' with citizens; second, by using the Internet to enable the better sharing of information within the organisation—a move referred to as 'joined-up government'. On the face of it, these Internet facilitated changes will point towards BCC experiencing a considerable shift towards a new networked organisational form, namely a 'citizen-facing' organisation capable of engaging with the community it serves in new ways. However, in the remainder of the paper I concentrate on exploring how shifts to electronic channels and joined-up government need to be problematised in relation to three important organisational factors: BCC's pre-existing organisational structure; its organisational culture; and established managerial decision-making procedures. Ultimately, it is argued that these factors significantly limit the extent to which Internet use within BCC results in greater community engagement.

Methodology

The research design incorporated triangulation of three distinct research methodologies. First, a period of participant observation within BCC was conducted over a seven-month period from May to November 2000. A total of 44 days were spent working in the organisation—primarily in the Equalities Division of the Personnel and Organisation Department. The emphasis here was weighted more to observation than participation. However, as part of the conditions of gaining access to the organisation, I was tasked with producing a research report that aimed to investigate the potential for utilising ICTs to engage 'socially excluded' communities in the Birmingham area. This report, *Closer to Citizens? Social Inequality and ICTs*, was published by BCC in 2001. Second, a total of 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with BCC employees, and two with members of the council, over the period from August 1999 to August 2001. The job role and function of these individuals varied widely, but each was involved in implementing or running ICT projects. Third, an extensive amount of documentary analysis was conducted. This was primarily aimed at tracking policy developments in the 'modernising agenda', examining the role of ICTs within this agenda, and understanding BCC's subsequent responses to this programme of New Labour led reform. As such, it involved an analysis of national and local policy documentation, as well as a review of BCC's internal managerial statements of strategy. This particular combination of methodologies was chosen in order to enable a grounded study of Internet use in the organisation to be completed. A primary aim here, in line with an interpretative epistemology, was to gain an understanding of how the research participants made sense of their use of Internet technology, particularly in relation to constructions of community and community engagement. The timeframe of the research coincided with the planning stages of a significant revamp of the organisation's website (discussed in detail in the analysis sections which follow).

New Labour Led 'Modernisation' and Community Engagement at BCC

As Dutton¹⁶ has argued, the inter-relationship between technological and organisational change should always be considered in light of the development of public policies. For the current analysis such a perspective is particularly important. The structure and purpose of local government is explicitly shaped by the policies of

national government. Moreover, New Labour came to power in 1997 with a desire to build upon, and modify, a major programme of local government reform instigated in the 1980s and 1990s by successive Conservative governments. This was primarily articulated in New Labour's concern to 'modernise' the public service,¹⁷ and enacted into law in the Local Government Acts of 1999 and 2000.¹⁸ Seeing local authorities as distanced from their electorates and less than open/accountable in their operation, in 'modernising' local government New Labour has instigated a series of important changes to the way in which local government operates. These changes are broad ranging, and include factors such as modifications to the committee systems that local government utilises,¹⁹ as well as the implementation of a new Best Value Performance Framework which monitors the services that local government provides in new ways.²⁰ Whilst such changes have important ramifications for local government, of greater longer term significance has been the new emphasis placed upon the revitalisation of community in relation to 'modernising' local government.

New Labour has not only stated clearly that it wants to 'see consultation and participation embedded into the culture of all councils',²¹ but it has also placed a legislative duty upon them to promote the overall 'well being' of the communities they serve.²² As part of this duty each council is now required to produce and publish a community plan for their locality (BCC published its first 'Community Strategy' in 2002). Moreover, councils have been given increased powers to enter into partnerships with private, voluntary, and community groups. That is, rather than operate as a unitary decision maker and provider of services, the idea is that councils should operate at the apex of a network of institutions, as 'community leaders'. This shift to community leadership has received a great deal of academic attention,²³ and it has been convincingly argued that the very purpose of local government has been transformed by such developments—away from the practice of local government (via unitary councils operating in relative isolation) and towards the practice of local governance.²⁴ Thus governing 'outcomes' now depend upon complex interactions between networks of institutions, with the council performing a role of 'facilitation' as opposed to public administration.²⁵

As Leach and Percy-Smith²⁶ note, such changes have fundamental consequences for how local authorities must now engage with their communities. That is, now they must not only deliver local services in partnership with other organisations; they must also seek to develop active input from the local community in the governing process. This means that, as well as representing the needs of the community, they must begin 'developing voices in the local community'²⁷ that can guide the *planning* of service delivery as well as policy development. In line with this new community leadership paradigm, BCC is actively seeking to engage with New Labour's agenda by developing 'a new partnership approach to the governance of the city':

The Council cannot plan and deliver every public service and development within the city. A successful city relies on strong community networks, built on the skills and commitment of local people, on a thriving network of voluntary and private organisations which can contribute to the city's success and on large public agencies and private companies that can bring significant resources to the city.²⁸

In developing this new partnership approach BCC has sought to redevelop the ways it operates through implementing new, innovative uses of the Internet.

Modernisation, the Internet, and Community Engagement at BCC: A New 'Citizen-Facing' Organisation?

At the same time as New Labour outlined its agenda for modernising the public service, it made it clear that ICTs had a central role to play in this process.²⁹ Indeed, the progression of the modernising agenda has been accompanied by a 'feverish outpouring of policy papers and guidance'³⁰ related to the role of ICTs in governmental reform. The Cabinet Office, the Cabinet Office Central IT Unit (CITU) and the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU), the latter two newly formed as part of the modernising programme, have led the way here, publishing the following key policy statements: *E-Government: A Strategic Framework for Public Services in the Information Age*,³¹ *Implementing E-Government: Guidelines for Local Government*,³² and *E-Gov: Electronic Government Services for the 21st Century*.³³

In broad terms, the vision being outlined emphasises utilising the networking potential of ICTs, and in particular the Internet, in two inter-related ways. First, government is to create new electronic access 'channels' for citizens, with websites being featured most prominently.³⁴ This creation of electronic access channels is aimed at enabling citizens to choose 'when and where they interact with government', and will mean all services will become available '24 hours a day, 7 days a week'.³⁵ Indeed, New Labour has committed itself to ensuring that all services are made available electronically by the end of 2005, and as part of this goal developed a Best Value Performance Indicator—BVPI157—which measures the 'percentage of interactions with the public, by type, which are capable of electronic services delivery and which are being delivered using Internet protocols or other paperless methods'.³⁶ Second, government is to utilise ICTs in the better sharing of information within and between governmental departments and agencies as part of 'joined-up government'.

Via these developments, ICTs are to aid the modernising process by creating a 'citizen-facing' government. That is, ICTs are to aid in shifting government towards a strong *external* focus on the needs of 'people—people as consumers, people as citizens'.³⁷ Internal structures and procedures are to be reorganised with this aim in mind. For example, citizen-facing government aims to treat people in a more 'holistic' fashion³⁸ by reorganising the provision of governmental information around 'life-themes' (such as finding work or starting a family). Such changes often involve new forms of inter-departmental cooperation on a number of levels, for example in terms of managerial decision-making as well as in information processing. Consultation with the public over service delivery and policy development, enabled via electronic channels and effectively disseminated throughout government via joined-up government, is also prioritised in shifts to citizen-facing government. This vision of an ICT enabled modernised public service has been applied as strictly to local government as it has been to central agencies and departments. It is, therefore, intimately tied to the key aim of restructuring local authorities as community leaders.

In terms of its experience in utilising Internet technology, BCC was relatively well placed to respond to the call for developing electronic channels. The Economic Development Department first developed a website in 1994, well ahead of most councils (and ahead of the development of the modernising agenda itself). Then named 'Birmingham Assist',³⁹ the website was originally part of an innovative strategy for delivering work training schemes to people in their homes. However, it quickly outgrew this limited remit as it began to be utilised by the development

team to publicise additional information about BCC and its services. In 1996 a decision was made to adopt Birmingham Assist as the Council's 'official' site, and in 1997 the management of Assist was transferred to the Libraries and Learning Division. As the modernising agenda progressed throughout the late 1990s, however, concern grew within the senior management of BCC that the existing website had '... now fallen behind other councils in the scope, style, clarity and interactivity of what it offer[ed]'.⁴⁰ The redevelopment and re-launch of the website was therefore planned throughout 2001 and executed in 2002 (by UK IT consultancy Morse Hughes Ray). In line with New Labour's modernising agenda, the purpose of the website was redefined by the Website Development Steering Group (WDSG):

The purpose of Birmingham City Council's website is to: be a source of information; provide an interactive and transactional channel for access to services; give a platform for local voices, reflecting citizens' views and concerns; help fulfil the city council's community leadership role.⁴¹

In line with these goals, the redevelopment of the website has resulted in a number of substantive changes. In terms of providing information, BCC's website already presented a great deal of content online before the revamp even began—7,000 pages by June 2001.⁴² However, significant progress has been made in terms of usability. Since the completion of the revamp in 2002 each webpage now conforms to a standardised template that incorporates new navigational features. That is, each webpage is now framed by menus along the top and left hand side which provide hyperlinks to particular topics, and an additional series of 'quick links' has been provided to those specific pages that generate most demand—for example links to the homepage, a 'what's on page', job listings (for BCC positions), a 'what's new' page listing recent updates and additions to the website, and an 'A-Z webpage' listing specific topics of information in alphabetical order. The presentation of information has also been fundamentally reorganised. As opposed to the core of the site revolving around a series of departmental webpages, issues are now grouped into seven 'life themes' which represent distinct sections of the website, including 'business and the economy', 'community', 'environment', 'health', 'learning', 'leisure and tourism', and 'your council'. In line with the modernising agenda's goal of producing 'citizen-facing' government, this reorganisation of information means citizens no longer have to understand the complexities of BCC's organisational structure in order to quickly locate the information that they are after. Notably, the 'your council' themed section includes a series of easily navigable links to key policy documents and reports, which are all now provided online in a pdf format (and, in addition, each webpage itself is also available in a printer friendly version).

The goal of providing a 'platform for local voices' has been addressed by bolstering the interactive features of the website. A 'contact us' page gives details for contacting BCC by post, telephone, email and fax, provides email contact details for all major services, and also provides an online form for providing feedback directly to the web administrator. The website also hosts a discussion forum for Birmingham's citizens, where issues regarding the council, its policies, and the locality in general are discussed (participants must register online and all topics for discussion must be approved beforehand by the council). Besides listing contact details for services, a number of council services have been made directly available via the website—for example citizens can pay their council tax and businesses can

pay their rates, leisure centres can be booked, and the libraries joined/books renewed. There are also a number of electronic forms available (for example for street fault reporting), and users are also encouraged to contribute to the website itself (for example by suggesting links to alternative sites or by adding an event to the 'what's on' page).

The last significant feature of the revamp revolved around shifting the technological platform used from a Lotus Notes to an Oracle database, which means that the website is now, in principle, accessible across a variety of access devices—from mobile phones, to the web, to iDTV and kiosk systems (although no substantive moves to make the most of this functionality have yet been made: initial attempts to develop an iDTV service with local cable provider Telewest were begun in 2001 but abandoned in 2002 due to technical problems). However, the inter-operability provided by the shift to an Oracle database has meant that, within BCC as an organisation, the website can be used as a central source of information for the new Customer Contact Centre (which represents the other major step towards BCC's creation of 'electronic channels'). This phone centre, established in 2001, now deals with approximately 80% of incoming calls to BCC,⁴³ and its operators use the information contained in the Oracle database to deal with enquiries. Together, these two initiatives have meant that, as of 2003, BCC has been able to claim that 100% of its interactions with the public are deliverable electronically (under the definition of the term provided by BVPI157)—well ahead of the 2005 deadline set by New Labour. Moreover, in their 2003 survey of all 468 local authority websites the Society of Information Technology Management (SOCITM)⁴⁴ reported that BCC had achieved 'transactional' website status—the highest category of achievement. Only nine other local authorities achieved this status, and therefore SOCITM had rated the revamped BCC site as one of the 10 best in the UK (that is, in the top 2% of all sites).

In conjunction with the accolades received from SOCITM, there is also evidence available to suggest that the BCC website is being accessed and used in significant ways by Birmingham's citizens. For example, it is estimated that the site receives approximately 3.5 million visits per year.⁴⁵ Moreover, in an online survey conducted by BCC from November 2004 until March 2005, 22% of users reported visiting the site once per week; with 'seeking information on BCC' reported as being the most common reason for visiting (17%), followed by 'seeking local news' (13%).⁴⁶ Additionally, during the period of participant observation the website's management team received 'approximately a dozen'⁴⁷ requests for information, comments, or feedback from citizens per day via email (a figure which does not include the amount of times the website facilitated contact directly between citizens and departments—an activity which goes unrecorded by the site's feedback database). Perhaps more substantively, the new discussion forum for citizens had, by the end of 2004, attracted 435 registered users, with online debate, despite the editorial control exercised by BCC, ranging widely across topics such as local development, the environment, transport, entertainment and local sports. All of these factors suggest significant steps have been made in terms of revamping the website as an electronic channel for interacting with citizens.

Alongside their drive to establish electronic channels, BCC has also sought to address the second major theme of citizen-facing government, namely the better sharing of information via joined-up government. The key project in this regard is the development of BCC's Wide Area Network (WAN) in 1996. The establishment of the WAN prompted the organisation as a whole to adopt a common, open set of

communications protocols (TCP/IP; XML). Departments have utilised these protocols to develop a series of departmental intranets. However, whilst these facilitate greater information sharing within departments, they do not currently facilitate information sharing between departments. However, perhaps more significantly, the WAN has also allowed for the development, for the first time, of corporate—council wide—IT applications that utilise client-server technologies. The most prominent of these are GLAMIS (a city wide general ledger system) and the Human Resource application HRIS. By superseding individual departmental applications, these have provided easier, timelier access to some management information on a city wide basis. Moreover, in conjunction with the growing use of email within BCC, the WAN has provided a means for experimentation with a range of other applications of networking technologies. Only a very few of these networking initiatives currently operate across the organisation as a whole. For example the Better Governance Forum, an email discussion list intended to be utilised by employees to discuss the modernisation of BCC, provides access to a council wide online forum. However, the most important point to note in terms of the development of the WAN is that it has provided the technical *potential*, in utilising TCP/IP as a common ‘internal’ communication protocol, for the integration of attempts to develop joined-up government with the creation of electronic channels. This allows, in principle at least, for new forms of interaction between BCC and the public which dissolve sharp distinctions between internal information exchanges and communications with external users of the electronic channels.

In summary, in adopting its new ‘community leadership’ role BCC has made significant moves to adapt to the model of local government outlined in the modernising agenda. That is, a networked, citizen-facing organisation, utilising the Internet to develop electronic channels and joined-up government. In the remainder of this article I set these changes against an analysis of the broader organisational context of BCC by discussing three inter-related themes: the organisational structure of BCC, the organisational culture of BCC, and the managerial and decision-making processes of BCC. Ultimately, I argue that these factors complicate the organisational changes underway and limit the extent to which new forms of community engagement have been achieved.

The Organisational Structure of BCC: ‘You Can’t Turn a Super-tanker Around on a Six-pence’

Like all other UK local authorities, BCC operates as, in the words of one senior manager, a ‘dual organisation’.⁴⁸ Alongside the political structure of BCC sits the bureaucratic/organisational component of local government. In the case of BCC this structure is both massive in size and complex in operation. BCC provides over 200 services, spends approximately £2.3 billion annually, and employs over 50,000 people. This structure is set up with the overriding goal of supporting council members in the implementation of policy. The work of 43 neighbourhood offices, the network of local libraries, the work of local education authorities, and, indeed, the operation of many other organisational ‘units’ are coordinated by a single central office. This central office was the location of the fieldwork reported here, and provided the main focus for the analysis. Its structure is built around the functional breakdown of activities into 12 departments (most oriented around specific services such as Social Welfare or Housing, but some with a more ‘corporate’ orientation, like Personnel and Organisation), each of which in turn has a

number of divisions under its control (which in turn may be further divided into the work of various divisional teams).

Traditionally, each department has acted as an independent entity, seeing its functional remit as requiring little in the way of cooperation with other sectors of the Council. The depth to which such functional separation influences day-to-day working life became extremely clear during the period of participant observation. For example, in producing a research report for BCC which required collating information on all major ICT projects underway (see Methodology), it became evident that there were few mechanisms for sharing information between departments. No one person, department, or team maintained an overview of all the ICT projects implemented, and so producing the general review required meant months of trawling through individual departmental documents and chasing information through interviews. Such structural divides are supported by many facets of the Council's operation, but the key factors seemed to be that budgets/spending levels are administered at a departmental level, and that managerial decision-making powers are departmentally structured. Thus spending priorities and day-to-day decision-making, though guided by policy, remain largely within departmental control.

This functionally divided departmental structure has impacted on the way information systems have developed within BCC. Although a corporately oriented Central IT Division exists within the Personnel and Organisation Department, it is responsible for administering, but not controlling, the procurement of hardware and software. Each department retains the power to create or commission its own ICT systems. Often these systems are specifically tailored to meet departmental needs, and therefore the result has been the creation of a set of 'information silos': a plethora of systems that are largely incompatible with each other. Indeed, according to a senior IT manager, the 10 major service departments alone operated, by 1999, over 380 different ICT applications.⁴⁹ The call to joined-up government is therefore a political agenda that runs up against entrenched organisational uses of ICTs that are often fundamentally opposed to the sharing of information. Moreover, organisational change at the departmental level takes a considerable amount of time and effort. Indeed, variations on the following view were recited several times in interviews, as well as in day-to-day conversations:

Trying to produce change in Birmingham City Council is like trying to turn a super-tanker around on a six-pence. There's a lot of momentum behind the old structures.⁵⁰

This 'momentum behind the old structures' results in networked, inter-departmental uses of ICTs like the website, which utilise common protocols and data standards, co-existing with departmental stand-alone systems, based upon functional divisions between departments, and utilising incompatible data standards.

In terms of redeveloping BCC as a citizen-facing organisation, much depends upon shifts towards joined-up government. However, the degree to which 'joined-up' government is realised will fundamentally depend upon the extent to which information silos can be phased out in favour of networked ICT applications. Whether or not this will occur is currently a matter for debate. As Chadwick notes, the 'Weberian exigencies'⁵¹ that drive the creation of information silos within government will come under pressure in shifts to e-government, but this does not mean that they will disappear. Departments will still need to process large amounts of relatively discrete data. Such processes often involve comparatively simple forms

of data entry, archiving and automation that will remain amenable to customised ICT solutions. This may explain why departmental IT managers interviewed varied in their reaction to developing a coordinated approach. Some felt comfortable with coordinating ICT development inter-departmentally but some did not. Given that departmental coordination cannot be easily enforced upon departments, BCC itself has identified structural issues as a major 'internal' risk factor in implementing joined-up e-government:

IEG [Implementing E-government] activities will need to be prioritised and coordinated corporately. Initiatives or projects which conflict with IEG objectives will need to be halted or constrained ... Traditionally, the City Council has little experience of these methods of working or of the project management disciplines which are needed to support them.⁵²

Structural issues do not only impact upon the development of joined-up government, they also impact upon the drive to establish unified, comprehensive electronic channels. Whilst the Assist website was adopted as BCC's 'official' site as far back as 1996, many departments have resisted this move, preferring to develop their own websites that they deem better suited to facilitating their interactions with the community. Indeed, by the time the redevelopment of the official site was being planned in 2001, 17 separate websites existed promoting BCC services. These websites, containing significant amounts of information and offering their own interactive services, include major sites such as the 'Birmingham Grid for Learning' (<http://www.bgfl.org/bgfl/>), run by the Education Department, and the 'Locate Birmingham' site (<http://www.locatebirmingham.org.uk/>) run by Economic Development. The growth of these sites raises serious issues for the notion that Internet technology is providing a user friendly, citizen (as opposed to departmental) oriented electronic channel. As the Website Development Steering Group commented: 'the corporate value of promoting a city council service and the move to a cross-cutting approach to our work is being lost by the stand alone nature of these sites'.⁵³ The redevelopment of the website in 2001/2002 therefore sought to address this issue by providing extensive numbers of hyper-links to these other sites, making it easier to navigate through them and return to the official site without 'leaving' BCC. Nevertheless, this does nothing to address the underlying dynamics of the situation. The overall web presence of BCC manifests the same tensions, between a corporate and a departmental approach, evident in the development of 'information silos'. The redesigning of the official site to present BCC online as a singular organisation, oriented outwards towards community engagement, is in fact incongruous with the more fragmented reality that emerges when these alternative departmental websites are considered.

The Organisational Culture of BCC: 'Warring Balkan States'?

Given the size of BCC, and its functionally divided nature, assessing its corporate culture is a complex task. In fact, it is more accurate to talk of BCC's corporate cultures—there are varying systems of values and beliefs which inform organisational behaviour. However, I wish to focus on only two aspects of this level of differentiation and complexity, which were raised by employees as common themes in relation to how cultural issues impact upon utilising the Internet to develop citizen-facing government. First, differing departments have *unique*

cultures which often lead to very different understandings of the role that electronic channels should play in community engagement. Second, employees continually referred to a broader background of inter-departmental hostility, or a general culture of conflict *between* departments, that acted as an important background to the changes being wrought by moves to joined-up government. I will discuss each of these in turn.

Whilst the modernising agenda has prioritised the creation of electronic channels with the community across the organisation as a whole, the ways in which this is interpreted vary within BCC. This is not an issue related to the technology per se, nor merely to structural/functional divides, but to different, strongly held beliefs about how the Internet is best used to improve relationships with the community. The proliferation of websites beyond the official site is, therefore, not merely due to structural factors. Cultural differences mean different departments often view 'the community' in fundamentally different ways, and therefore set about developing different sets of electronic channels:

Behind structural divides lie differences in outlook, differences in the way in which people perceive the citizen, which then lead to differences in the ways of collecting data about them.⁵⁴

Indeed, in this context the imposition of a single, 'official' website for BCC has been viewed with suspicion by some departments, being seen as an issue of internal politics, i.e. a politically led effort to impose central control over their affairs, rather than being a *citizen*-focused attempt at developing electronic channels:

There is tension between the proposition that BCC is a single organisation, and I'm willing to accept that it is, and the fact that there is ... a divergence between its [departmental] functional units. Each of these functions is increasingly creating a different relationship with the community and establishing a different set of links in terms of private partnerships. They all have different values on promotion. The problem is that, despite the growing awareness of the need for integration, the business unit approach is still strong ... Assist [the 'official' website] is caught in the middle of these moves. There is a debate over whether Assist represents an outdated attempt at control or a move towards integration.⁵⁵

These debates and tensions over the official website are not only played out in terms of the proliferation of websites. Some departments see the Internet as an entirely inappropriate device for dealing with the community/communities they serve, which may be perceived as socially disadvantaged and lacking Internet access. Rather than produce alternative websites, these departments have tended to resist utilising the Internet altogether (a factor raised as a problematic issue in a number of other analyses⁵⁶). Thus, whilst the success of the official site depends on its varied content being continually updated by all departments, some departments have conducted what one employee referred to as 'guerrilla warfare'⁵⁷ in this regard. That is, officially departmental managers agree to update the website's content, and then proceed to make this task an extremely low priority. This has meant that, historically, some of the web content of the official site has quickly become 'embarrassingly out of date'.⁵⁸

However, the revamp of the website has sought to address this issue through relocating the web development team to the Corporate Communications (or

public relations) Department (a more ‘corporately’ focused section of BCC than Library Services), and strengthening its line management through the creation of a new e-government managerial post with ‘responsibility for the final approval of web pages, troubleshooting and developing the website to meet future needs’.⁵⁹ Whilst such organisational moves effectively cede much of the editorial control away from departments, and may therefore help improve the timeliness of the online content they provide, they do not necessarily result in all departments becoming committed to the ongoing development of the Internet as a full electronic channel. Forms of ‘guerrilla warfare’, such as departments committing to post only limited amounts of information, may well continue into the future.

These types of issues lead into the second area of concern raised by BCC employees regarding the inter-relationship between Internet use and organisational culture—that is the widely held view that ‘BCC has evolved a culture of non-cooperation between departments’.⁶⁰ Indeed, one employee rather expressively pointed out the extent to which conflict was considered a key cultural concern: ‘I’ve worked in local authorities where conflict has been an issue, but it’s like warring Balkan states in here’.⁶¹ Although intended flippantly, the metaphor of ‘warring states’ does succinctly sum up this very real facet of conflict within the organisation’s overall culture. The different departments within BCC have not only tended to operate in a functionally divided way that is opposed to viewing the citizen holistically, they have often viewed any ‘interference’ from other departments in their relations with citizens extremely negatively—as ‘an intrusion on their turf’.⁶²

During the period of participant observation at BCC such conflict was rarely overtly expressed in day-to-day working life; nor does it characterise all relations between departments. Rather, the key point is that debate over the development of ICT systems is one major area where often latent forms of inter-departmental conflict are brought to the fore. Ultimately this is because, as Peled argues, ‘the information contained inside computers often determines which organisational factions will gain or lose power relative to others’.⁶³ Indeed, many involved in implementing and developing the newer *inter*-departmental ICT systems, including Assist and its revamp, viewed cultural conflict as being more important than technical problems and ‘functional’ divides:

[When implementing inter-departmental systems] people will meet with you and tell you that your ideas were good and that they were behind you. Then various [technical] issues would come up, and you would have to solve them ... Then once you’d solved them more issues would spring up and you would try to tackle them, and so it would go on and on until finally you would realise that the real issue is cultural.⁶⁴

This issue therefore helps further explain the proliferation of standalone websites and the continued existence of information silos within BCC. The production of incompatible departmental ICT systems is not only related to functional necessity, it is also derived from a broader culture of conflict which means managers often *actively* seek to bolster divisions between departments by creating standalone systems and resisting inter-departmental developments. Indeed, this culture of conflict suggests that technological change in itself provides no guarantee that information sharing will ever actually occur—a problem that has been documented in other analyses.⁶⁵

The Managerial Hierarchy of BCC: ‘Who Makes What Decisions and On What Basis?’

Whilst the decision-making processes of BCC’s political structure were quickly altered in line with modernisation, to a cabinet style of ‘governance’ in January 2000, the decision-making processes of the bureaucratic/organisational component of BCC have remained relatively unchanged. Each department is dominated by rigid, hierarchical, vertical management structures that have traditionally been geared at supporting the functional separation of BCC’s activities (predominantly in terms of the core business of the Council—service delivery). The vast majority of the £2.3 billion spent annually by BCC is controlled from within these departmental management structures. As was evident particularly during the period of participant observation, this situation raises a number of issues for BCC in terms of analysing shifts to citizen-facing government.

In the first instance, BCC’s development of unified, ‘citizen-centric’ electronic channels sits uncomfortably with the division of managerial decision-making powers along functionally divided lines. For relatively simple forms of online interaction (such as the payment of council tax) the development of electronic channels is relatively unproblematic. This is because these generic forms of engagement with the community do not, essentially, disrupt departmental dynamics as they largely come clearly under the remit of existing departments. They reflect, rather, an extension of existing ways of delivering services into an online environment (with the important caveat that reorganising the website around ‘life themes’ does mark a substantive break from the past—making it far easier for users to locate the services on the website that they wish to access regardless of their knowledge of intricate departmental structures).

For more complex forms of community engagement, such as utilising the online forum to provide a ‘platform for citizens’ voices’, the ‘offline’ reality of diffused managerial powers becomes much more challenging. If such interaction is to be utilised meaningfully by BCC, it will often need to be debated throughout the Council as a whole—at both political *and* organisational levels (where managerial decisions over implementing policy are made). Yet there are currently no information systems at the ‘back end’ capable of capturing such debate and distributing it to politicians and departments for discussion, and there are no binding inter-departmental decision-making procedures in place capable of producing a coordinated response to online debates. These types of complexities are overlooked by performance measures such as BVPI157. The redevelopment of the website to include substantial interactive features has enabled BCC to validly claim—under the definitions provided by the Best Value regime—that its consultation with the public has become ‘100% e-enabled’.⁶⁶ This, however, hides the more complex reality pointed to here. The complexities of how electronic channels can provide effective feedback into policy debate, or into the corresponding managerial decisions over service delivery and the allocation of resources, have not yet been addressed by BCC.

Whether or not such issues will be resolved is presently unclear. New electronic channels which invite citizens into online debates over the Council’s overall performance, or which invite them to contact the Council in order to ‘have their say’, operate in ways that shift communication beyond departmental control. In the same vein, shifts to joined-up government imply a similar loss of departmental autonomy. This loss of departmental control fits the new political agenda well as these changes are associated with ‘including’ the citizen. However, it also means they meet

forms of departmental *resistance* as they effectively disrupt established managerial decision-making powers. For example, one senior manager in a major service department raised concerns over the entire project of joined-up government, commenting:

I want to know what ‘joined-up government’ means. Who makes the decisions and on what basis?⁶⁷

Ultimately then, debates over information exchanges within BCC become bound up in wider internal conflicts over ‘who makes what decisions and on what basis’. At stake is the power to control the use of organisational resources. In this sense, control over the flow of information acts as one of the organisation’s ‘most important material resources’.⁶⁸ That is, it helps determine which elements within the Council eventually gain or lose decision-making power relative to others. For these reasons, despite the new political imperative to ‘modernise’, many departments are likely to continue to raise questions over the nature of the reforms underway. Shifting BCC towards a ‘citizen-facing organisation’ is likely to continue to encounter ongoing forms of internal resistance.

Conclusions—the Internet, Organisational Change and Community Engagement at BCC

Rather than straightforwardly shifting towards a new form of citizen-facing organisation, BCC is actually an organisation in a complex, conflict-ridden transition. The revamp of the official BCC website and the creation of the call centre as new forms of ‘electronic channels’, combined with the growth of the WAN as a first step toward joined-up government, are facilitating new networked organisational practices that cut across traditional structural divides. At the same time, these practices meet internal forms of resistance and co-exist with more traditional forms of functionally divided, hierarchical command and control—which are being sustained, in part, by adaptive uses of the same technologies that facilitate networking. A conflicting combination of old and new forms of governmental operation therefore currently characterises BCC, a finding that suggests Fountain’s⁶⁹ account of the ‘virtual state’ in the USA, which reaches a similar conclusion in relation to what Fountain terms ‘Weber Redux’, can be applied to a UK context, and to local, as opposed to central, government.

Ultimately these factors limit the extent to which Internet use within BCC has resulted in new forms of community engagement. Despite the proliferation of websites, it does seem clear that BCC has become relatively adept at presenting a diversity of online information to the public. Moreover, the management changes associated with the revamp of the official site, and the shift to organising the site around ‘life themes’, have acted to improve the maintenance and presentation of much of the information provided by BCC. Such improvements in information provision may eventually act as a catalyst for greater community involvement in local government. The concept of developing new forms of active engagement with citizens/community groups has, however, been much more problematic for BCC. The interactivity required cuts to the heart of issues of power and control within the organisation. Real spaces for interaction have been opened up online. For example, the development of an online forum where citizens can have their say is significant. However, it is not clear what linkages will be made between the forum and the rest of the organisation. The extent to which online discussion will

feed back into the decision-making process is unclear, and the forum may not impact to any great extent upon the power of politicians and departments to make decisions regarding the locality. Nor is it clear how much organisational support it will receive on an ongoing basis. Given these types of issues, Orr's concerns regarding the nature of face-to-face public meetings in the new form of modernised 'local governance' may equally apply to online interactions with the public:

There is ... a question about the purpose of such exercises—are they designed truly to include people in the decision making process or merely to legitimate council decisions which will be made elsewhere, and thus socialise the discontented into the council's view of the world? Are we talking about a capacity for 'deliberation' or 'incorporation'?⁷⁰

Such concerns raise questions over the extent of community participation actually being facilitated by the development of 'citizen-facing' government. Indeed, currently the forms of interaction that are being successfully facilitated by Internet use within BCC tend to simply revolve around the provision of online forms of service, or primarily relate to dealing with queries about service provision, as these developments tend not to disrupt established organisational structures, cultures, and power relations to any great degree. If Birmingham's citizens are to receive new forms of more convenient online services from BCC's use of the Internet, then this is surely a material benefit not to be lightly dismissed. In fact, Orr also reminds us that the present emphasis on vague notions of governance 'marginalises the importance of service delivery and the way in which this is closely bound up in the representative role of local government'.⁷¹ That is, in the local government context, services matter to citizens and communities. Community governance would undoubtedly suffer in a neighbourhood where, for example, no rubbish bins were emptied and no streets were cleaned. Nevertheless, improvements to services ultimately represent a very limited version of community engagement.

Finally, given the current state of dynamism in the local government sector, this analysis is not intended to be read as the final word on BCC's utilisation of the Internet in developing forms of community engagement. Indeed, since the completion of the fieldwork described here, two significant changes have already been made to the organisation of BCC that will impact upon the extent to which the organisation's Internet use facilitates community engagement. First, a decision has been made to devolve decision-making powers over some services, such as rubbish collection, to a local level (although this change is so new that the Audit Commission's⁷² latest performance assessment of BCC has noted that its impact upon services has not yet been felt). Second, departments have recently been reorganised into five new 'strategic directives'—Resources, Development, Local Services, Learning and Culture, and Social and Health Care. Together these changes will eventually impact considerably upon the themes analysed in this paper. However, this does not mean that they will automatically change or disrupt the organisational dynamics described. For example, despite these changes, the Audit Commission notes that 'Cross-cutting [inter-departmental] service working ... is not yet common'⁷³—suggesting that departmental boundaries and cultural differences still matter. Nevertheless, such developments suggest an urgent need for ongoing research.

Notes and References

1. An earlier draft of this article was presented to the Queensland Government/United Nations International Conference on Engaging Communities in Brisbane, August 2005. The author would also like to thank Frank Webster for his advice and support during the conduct of this research, and the UK Economic and Social Research Council (award number R00429934167) for funding the research upon which this paper is based.
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