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Inside government: the role of policy actors in shaping e-democracy in the UK

by

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ABSTRACT

SOCIOLOGY, SOCIAL POLICY AND CRIMINOLOGY

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INSIDE GOVERNMENT: THE ROLE OF POLICY ACTORS IN SHAPING E-DEMOCRACY IN THE UK

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The thesis focuses on the emergence of e-democracy in the UK between 1999 and 2013. It examines the part that policy actors have played in shaping the agenda. Emphasis is placed on how e-democracy is understood by those charged with developing initiatives and implementing government policy on e-democracy. Previous research on e-democracy has focused largely on the impact of Web technologies on political systems and/or on how, why and to what degree, citizens participate. Less attention is paid to what happens inside government, in how policy actors' conceive public engagement in the policy process. Their perceptions and shared understandings are crucial to the commissioning, implementation, or deflection of participatory opportunities. This thesis is concerned with exploring how policy actors experience, interpret and negotiate e-democracy policy and practices and their perceptions of citizen involvement in the policy process. Competing discourses shape institutional expectations of e-democracy in the UK. The research examines how policy actors draw upon wider discourses such as the modernisation of government and the emphasis on transparency. It analyses understandings of technologies in government and the effects of relational interactions and linkages in policy and practice.

The thesis draws on fieldwork in the UK from 23 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant observation data with a range of policy actors: civil servants from several government departments, government advisors and participation practitioners. In conjunction with interviews, documentary analysis was carried out on government documents, published between1999 and 2013. These focused on the role of Web technologies in government and include policy papers, advisory reports, audit reports and guidance for civil servants. Documentary analysis was combined with interviews and participant observation to compare the stated aims of e-democracy with the constraints and opportunities experienced by policy actors in their work. The findings highlight how contested interpretations of participation and differing approaches to technology affect the design, management and evaluation of projects. Such interpretations and contestations are not developed in isolation but emerge as actors come together in different spaces and configurations. Probing the relationships, motivations and perceptions of government insiders provides new insights about the development of e-democracy within the institutional context in the UK.

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, MARY HOUSTON declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

Inside government: the role of policy actors in shaping e-democracy in the UK

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signed:.....

Date:.....

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Definitions and Abbreviations

ANT	Actor network theory is a disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities, and methods of analysis that treat everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located (Law, 2007)
BIS	Government department for Business, Innovation and Science
Cabinet Office	Government department with cross-government responsibilities for public service improvement, social exclusion and the third sector. It has a coordinating role to improve coherence, quality and delivery of policy and operations across departments.
CAQDAS	Computer Assisted Qualitative Data AnalysiS.
CERN	European Organization for Nuclear Research, known as CERN, a European research organization is based in Switzerland.
DCLG	Department for Communities and Local Government.
DEG	The concept of digital era governance (or DEG) claimed by Patrick Dunleavy, Helen Margetts and their co-authors as replacing NPM since around 2000-05.
Delib	Digital democracy company specialising in online consultation and citizen engagement.
Online Discussion Forum	Online forums take various forms, but they are generally asynchronous, meaning that people can choose to participate anytime and from anywhere they have an Internet connection. They may be broad in scope, covering an array of issues and conversation threads, or be more focused on specific issues. (Coleman and Moss, 2013).
E-democracy	ICT based initiatives that governments sponsor to improve the transparency and responsiveness of government, enhancing the participation of citizens in the policy process, or developing new opportunities for opinion formation and exchange among and between citizens (Prachett, 2007).

EDN	Policy actors who interact around e-democracy in a network.
E-government	Technology facilitated public-sector service delivery mechanisms.
E-voting	The use of ICT to facilitate participation in elections.
GDS	Government Digital Service set up in 2011 to lead digital strategy across government.
Gov.uk	Single government portal for access to government services and information.
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies.
Internet	Global system of interconnected computer networks that use the Internet protocol suite (TCP/IP) to link billions of devices worldwide.
MySociety	An e-democracy project of the UK-based registered charity named UK Citizens Online Democracy. It began with the aim of making online democracy tools for UK citizens.
NAO	The National Audit Office scrutinises public spending for Parliament to help Parliament hold government to account and improve public services.
NPM	New Public Management, a programme for public sector organizational change focused on themes of disaggregation, competition, and incentivisation.
NVivo	A qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package.
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) works on policies to improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.
Office of E-Envoy	The Office of the e-Envoy was set up by the Blair Government in 1999 and was replaced by the E-government Unit in September 2004.
OGD	Open Government Data: material (data) that can be freely used, reused and redistributed. Produced or commissioned by government or

	government controlled entities.
RCUK	Research Council United Kingdom.
SCOT	Social Construction of Technology theory sits within STS (see below).
SLB	Street Level Bureaucrats – a term first used by Michael Lipsky.
Social Media	Websites and applications enabling users to create and share content or participate in social networking.
STS	Science and Technology Studies considers how social, political, and cultural values affect scientific research and technological innovation, and how these, in turn, affect society, politics and culture.
Sustainable Communities Act (SCA)	SCA enabled local people, communities, parish and town councils to ask central government via local government to remove legislative or other barriers that prevented them from improving the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area.
TeaCamp	Regular informal gatherings for digital people who work in and around government and also outside of government
World Wide Web	Documents and other web resources are identified by URLs, interlinked by hypertext links, and can be accessed via the Internet. In 1989 Tim Berners-Lee wrote the initial proposal for the World Wide Web (www) at CERN in Switzerland.

Chapter 1: **Introduction**

1.1 Preamble to the thesis

My attachment to life-long learning had a poor start. I left school at 16 with three O' Levels (English Language, English Literature and Modern History). I was ill-equipped for the world of work but resistant at that point to further education. I started work at a small printing firm. It was the beginning of my interest in communication and technologies (well before the Internet was widely known about or accessible) I was fascinated by the workings of offset printing presses, and how the cogs and wheels of the machines produced communicative materials. Now printing has been digitalised and those machines are in museums.

After some years of full time work, I returned to education to study for two A' Levels in Sociology and Government and Politics, unaware that many years later I would be combining these areas of interest again. I went on to gain a degree in Politics at Coventry despite uncertainty as to what I could do with the subject. This was in the 1980s and still the pre-web era although computers were increasingly part of working life. In the mid 1990s I started work for a small charity as a communications officer, a role that encompassed developing their Information and Communications Technology (ICT) strategy, something I found very daunting. At that time I saw ICT predominantly as about computer hardware of which I had limited understanding. There were two people in the organisation who were pioneers in understanding the possibilities of the Web and they greatly expanded my horizons. From their different perspectives they helped me to think about the potential for information exchange, networking and empowerment. They informed my thinking about how technologies are perceived, the anxieties they prompt, and how organisations select or ignore technologies to reflect current structures and hierarchies. These are all themes that are present in my thesis.

Over 10 years ago I joined the Office of the Deputy Prime Minster, later the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) working in the communications directorate. Government departments are large, complex and political organisations and I am interested in how such organisations function; the gap between what is said at one level and what happens at another. The disjuncture and juxtapositions were highlighted by my experience of working on community empowerment policy when the space between policy intentions and implementation often seemed very wide. I wanted to understand more about how and why government seeks to use digital technologies in its engagement with citizens. I wrote a proposal trying to draw together the various interests I had accumulated and sent it to the

University of Southampton. They offered me the opportunity to work for a PhD in Sociology and Politics and through the Research Council United Kingdom (RCUK) doctoral training centre I was also linked to Web Science. Initially I intended to explore how citizens used the Web to influence government policy. Once I had begun surveying the literature however, I found that substantial work in this field already existed and I was unsure what further contribution I could offer. On the advice of my supervisors I realised that the role of officials in e-democracy was under-researched. As a civil servant, I had some insights and potential access to officials which would help me to investigate how civil servants perceive and shape e-democracy.

I continued to work part-time at DCLG while studying for my PhD. This split between work and study had its frustrations but there were also many helpful links. It has allowed me to maintain an understanding of the pressures experienced by civil servants, their concerns in using technologies and the relationships they build. Working as a civil servant also occasionally facilitated access to people I wished to interview. I started my research from the premise that civil servants played a role in shaping e-democracy but this was often overlooked and little understood. I have drawn on concepts and theories from Sociology and Political Science to examine organisations, discourses, and socio-technical practices combined with qualitative methods of investigation into the development of e-democracy in the UK to date. This allows for a deeper, more multi-layered insight into where e-democracy might be headed in the future.

1.2 Framing the problem

In the UK as in other countries, the government has become alarmed at the apparent continued disengagement from politics and the disillusionment of citizens. The act of voting *per se* is not sufficient for many citizens to feel engaged in the political system (Hay and Stoker, 2009: 226). Reported levels of satisfaction with government continue to drop (Hansard Society, 2013: 19). However, public cynicism about the political system does not mean citizens are uninterested or uninvolved in politics. While some are resolutely anti-politics (Hay and Stoker, 2009: 226) for others, political commitments and engagement at the personal level has grown even while commitment to established institutions has declined. Citizen politics has become issue-led and decentralised (Dahlgren, 2009: 32). From the perspective of governments, the problem lies in attracting the distributed attention and energies of citizens into more structured institutional initiatives and linking them effectively with policy formation and political decision making. In principle, digital technologies might be used to enhance democratic practices and offer opportunities for broader democratic renewal. Nonetheless, it

is unclear to what extent e-democratic initiatives to date have impacted on the scope and quality of public debates, levels of citizen engagement, or improvement in policy formation or decision making.

From Professor Sir Tim Berners Lee's initial work at CERN in 1989, the World Wide Web has grown to an estimated 3.1 billion users in 25 years. In many areas of operation, governments increasingly depend upon Web technologies which are an essential part of administration, information and delivery systems. As the Web's availability increased and uses developed from static pages of information to social media and the mobile Web, so too have widely articulated perceptions that the Web could offer potential for transforming the democratic process by expanding and enhancing opportunities for citizen participation in policy issues and decision-making (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 9, Dahlberg, 2001: 616, Hilbert, 2009: 92, Kakabase et al., 2003: 50). Social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, has led to renewed optimism for democratic possibilities on the Web (Loader and Mercea, 2011: 785) as governments recognise the potential value of voluntary networked public input.

The introduction of e-democracy occurred at a particular historical juncture in the UK. Public access to the Internet rapidly increased in the run-up to the Millennium and just after, and at the same time political anxiety about public participation in the democratic process intensified. Labour was elected in 1997 with a clear commitment to democratic renewal and modernisation of political institutions. The new government was enthusiastic about adopting new technologies in pursuit of their goals. In 2001, Robin Cook was appointed chair of a Cabinet Committee with a brief to consider how to implement e-democracy. This resulted in the publication of a green paper, *In the service of Democracy* in 2002. Following its publication a number of e-democratic initiatives were funded at central government level and the National Project for Local E-democracy was established in 2005 (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 3). However, despite support for e-democracy in some quarters; from 2008/9 enthusiasm for e-democracy appeared to wane in favour of developing open government data.

The Coalition Government in 2010 revived interest in using Web technologies to elicit citizen engagement at the same time as the development of social media platforms for networked contributions stimulated discussions on their democratic potential. The Coalition set up a number of crowd-sourcing sites to gain input from citizens to solve problems. They included *Your Freedom, Spending Challenge* and *Red Tape Challenge*. The government also re-instated e-petitions. If over 100,000 signatures were gathered, the e-petition became eligible for formal debate in parliament. Like Labour before them, the initial impetus faltered and it is not clear

how much substantive democratic change occurred. Much of the Coalition's emphasis with regard to Web technologies lay in developing the open government agenda that they had taken on from Labour.

Between 1999-2013 therefore successive governments advanced consistently positive rhetoric about the benefits of using digital technologies to enhance democratic participation (see Office of the E-Envoy, 2002, HM Government., 2012b). E-democracy appeared to offer the prospect of addressing widespread concerns about political disengagement and dissatisfaction with the democratic system. In turn, such initiatives extend fresh possibilities to citizens for additional involvement, understanding and engagement in policy and decision making processes. Yet each wave of optimism about the transformative possibilities of the new media, has over time given way over time to disappointment and more measured appraisal (Loader and Mercea, 2011: 758), consigning e-democracy once more to the margins.

E-democracy cannot be understood as a separate from democracy, it has to be considered within its context. The potential of web technologies to revive democratic participation is set against the backdrop of anxiety about levels of public engagement in the political system. Democracy is an ideal that will never fully be realised but however it is manifested, it requires a degree of citizen participation at some level to give it legitimacy. Exploration of what constitutes democracy and citizen participation in political decision-making is integral to understandings of e-democracy. E-democracy focuses on the use of ICT as a tool to enhance citizens' involvement in public policy-making (OECD, 2003:1). Digital tools are increasingly part of everyday political processes and organising democratic and administrative interactions just as digital tools have become more embedded in other parts of people's lives.

As e-democracy emerged as a description of a set of aims and processes at a particular point of technology and politics, a parallel process in public administration was also taking place. E-government, like e-democracy is a contested term, it suffers from definitional vagueness (Yildiz, 2007: 650) but is most often used to describe the uses of information and communication technologies (ICT) to deliver government information and services. As Margetts notes, e-government is big business accounting (in 2006) for more than £14 billion annually in the UK (Margetts, 2006: 250). As with e-democracy, policy makers perceived the use of Web technologies to support modernisation of government although the focus was directed rather more intensively at administrative reform and service delivery than in employing their use to aid the effectiveness of democratic processes (Freeman and Quirke, 2013: 142). E-democracy appears more difficult to evaluate in managerial terms making it potentially vulnerable to slipping down government's list of priorities. However this binary

approach to government's use of technologies into e-government or e-democracy is problematic because it suggests that activities are either developed for administrative improvement or for democratic purposes and there is little or no convergence between the two areas. In practice, the separation between the two types of endeavours is not always clear-cut. It is more useful to consider e-government and e-democracy and government use of the Web as a heterogeneous set of understandings and activities in which public participation may also be conceived by civil servants as playing a part in service improvements or in monitoring government.

An important aspect of these long standing debates is the extent to which they continue to influence what is understood as e-democracy within government. The thesis is concerned with how much the debates inform ideas on technologies and democratic participation. The term 'e-democracy' implies that democracy and Web technologies are intertwined in a dynamic and dialogical relationship. Change in one has effects on the other although not in a directly causal way, the effects are always in combination with other forces. It is the examination of the ways in which Web technologies shape or are shaped by democratic understandings and practices that the thesis seeks to investigate more deeply.

1.3 Formulating the research question

Despite the hopes and claims for the revitalisation of democracy through digital technologies, outcomes to date have been uncertain (Prachett, 2007, Coleman and Moss, 2013, Wright, 2006a) There have been some innovative experiments undertaken including large scale discussion forums, e-petitions and more recently a number of crowdsourcing initiatives but for policies and practices to be embedded in government, they also need to be sustainable and routinised. Technology does not by itself significantly advance democratic participation. The attraction of digitally facilitated democracy is still a draw for governments even though there is a substantial mismatch between rhetoric and reality.

While existing research has explored the value and social composition of citizen participation and has looked at the effects of the Internet on the political system, we still know little about the role of government insiders in shaping the outcomes of online democratic initiatives in policy making. There is much that is unclear about their role in government sponsored democratic engagement such as their understanding of the nature and purpose of engagement, their interaction with technologies and the strategies undertaken to balance the institutional pressures and processes with democratic intentions. Actors within the political and institutional system, particularly civil servants have an often overlooked role in shaping and

realising e-democracy through their views on democracy and citizen participation, understanding and use of technologies, design and commissioning of projects and their evaluation of the responses received.

This lack of attention is significant because the role of civil servants involves both interpretation of political instructions and translation into processes and practices (HM Government., 2012a: 3). At all levels of seniority and professional knowledge, they have an influence enacted through many small day to day decisions and interactions with colleagues and partners. In the investigation of the role that civil servants play in shaping e-democracy, this thesis recognises that the civil service is not a single group but a diverse body of actors, across government. Within the civil service there are both connections and divisions between departments, hierarchies, professions and interests. Furthermore, development and delivery of policy increasingly goes beyond the institutional civil service and encompasses other policy actors. The thesis therefore examines the effects of discursive constructions, interactions and practices across this wider group of actors in determining the shape of e-democracy, its implementation and execution.

The value of empirical investigation lies in revealing the intricacies and interdependencies of e-democracy in practice which are not otherwise easily accessible. Prachett (2007) used the metaphor of an X-ray to suggest that a more informed diagnosis can be arrived at by looking beneath the surface of government, at the skeleton. Another metaphor often used is to look inside the black box of government (for example Yildiz, 2007: 660) to better understand what happens inside complex policy environments. In studying the complex, shifting fluidity of technologies, rationalities and processes relevant to e-democracy, analysis shifts from the idea that initiatives are fixed and stable entities and understands them more as performative and relational.

This thesis therefore examines relationships, narratives, technologies and organisational factors germane to e-democracy in order to find explanations for the development of e-democracy in the UK. The central question of this thesis is: How do policy actors understand and enact e-democracy?

This core question was divided into three areas of investigation:

- How do differing conceptualisations of democratic participation influence understandings of e-democracy?
- How do policy actors' perceptions and experiences of Web technologies frame and define e-democratic initiatives

- What is the significance of interactions between policy actors in different networks and spaces in the development and impact of e-democracy?

In order to address these questions my thesis draws upon literatures from democratic theory, public administration and constructions of technology in exploring the following themes: First, the role of discourses are scrutinised in constructing notions of citizenship and participation that are central to how e-democracy has been conceptualised. Second, I analyse the policy actors' experiences of Web technologies, in terms of the enactment of technologies in and between government organisations and the effects of resources, history and expectations in the context of e-democracy projects. Thirdly, I focus on how the different policy actors involved in e-democracy assemble around particular projects or broader programmes such as open data. The materialising effects of their interactions, transactions, performance, activities and movements in specific contexts are examined to provide insight into the stops and starts of e-democracy and its variations, resistances, expansions and contractions.

The term 'e-democracy' is employed throughout the thesis for simplicity and consistency while recognising that it is an ambiguous and contested term. I have defined e-democracy as top-down government initiatives using Web technologies to enhance the participation of citizens in the policy process, or enable opinion formation and exchange among and between citizens. (Prachett, 2007: 4, Macintosh et al., 2009).

The argument presented here is that e-democracy is situated within wider discussions about the nature of democracy and the role of citizen participation. Some understandings of democratic participation draw upon ideas relating to modernisation of government. Modernisation conceptualises citizen participation primarily as consumers or monitor of government services and performance while more radical traditions of democratic participation understand citizens as potential co-producers and collaborators in policy and decision making. I suggest that there are constant and fluctuating tensions between discussions on modernisation discourse and alternative forms of democratic participation. In part this is due to the contemporary conflict between representative democracy and the participatory aspirations of citizens. However tensions also arise because policy actors encounter citizen participation very differently on 'the ground' compared to the macro level. In their efforts to make sense of the situations they are in, new understandings and practices develop. E-democracy is a product of these conflicts between different discourses and interactions between actors as they define and implement projects.

Policy actors then, are not just operators of technologies; they must also adopt, adjust and respond to technologies, bringing these into use in both policy decisions and everyday practices. It follows from this that understanding the role of e-democracy also requires an exploration of the institutional relationship with digital technologies. The relationship encompasses complex, multiple and dynamic interactions of attitudes, confidence, skills and organisational capacity. It can be more deeply understood by tapping into the experiences of those who are involved in developing and implementing e-democratic initiatives.

In focusing on the policy actors, my argument is that my research offers a new way of understanding e-democracy. Previously, there has often been a sense of puzzlement or frustration (in government and with practitioners as well as academics) that e-democracy is not working out in ways that were hoped for or expected. Implicit ideas of technical determinism can mean that new forms or uses of technology renew hopes of transformation in democratic engagement without examining the underlying dynamics that previously led to disappointment. My research explores how different understandings of democracy shape e-democracy and takes the approach that institutional and technological variables are not independent or fixed but rather co-constitutive. This approach avoids on one hand the reification of technology that is prevalent in much government literature, and on other the separation of e-democracy as a normative ideal from the realities of 'doing'. My point is that in focusing on the policy actors, the complexity and granularity of connections between actors, relations and contexts become visible and allow for a more nuanced analysis.

In order to delve beneath the surface, I used a qualitative approach to generate explanations based on understanding how the social worlds of e-democracy actors are constituted. This approach suggests that the social world is always being constructed, it is dynamic and the meanings that actors ascribe to ideas, norms and values form part of its evolving construction that then constrain or enable actions. Consequently, my aim is to explore how policy actors understand and talk about participation and democracy, their perceptions of technologies and their associations with the political and policy process. I seek to examine how e-democracy policy has evolved, to uncover the undercurrents and interactions within and across institutions; map network and power relationships operating at different levels, and trace how knowledge is interpreted, shared and translated. By taking this approach I am able to take an overview of the interplay between digital technologies and democratic participation in government rather than exploring the intricacies of particular online projects. This avoids a tendency to examine only the more unusual and experimental initiatives but to consider instead the history and relevance of e-democracy.

1.4 The roadmap of the thesis

This chapter lays out the broad rationale and aims which my thesis seeks to address, by placing questions about e-democracy within a context of wider debates about understanding and uses of technologies in political systems and on focusing on the role of government insiders. The political environment and the timeframe from within which e-democracy in the UK emerges, is considered and established. The intellectual puzzle to which the thesis seeks answers focuses on understanding the role that policy actors play in shaping e-democracy. The contribution of the research is in this qualitative exploration of policy actors, their conceptualisations and practices.

The objective of chapter 2 is to review existing literature relevant to my research questions and critically examine the current state of knowledge in the context of how it informs the thesis. One of the challenges arising from my survey of the research is that there are several distinct literatures of relevance to the thesis. There are significant bodies of work from democratic theory, organisational sociology and public administration and policy, as well as the construction and use of technologies. Yet there is a disconnection between these different forms of analysis hindering a deeper exploration of the nature and development of e-democracy. My review seeks to draw out the relationship between technology and organisations, between ideas of democracy and the interplay of political pressures and processes. Interrogating the literatures in this way allows for a more complex awareness to be developed of the embeddedness and interconnections between actors, processes and practices.

Chapter 3 focuses on the research design and the methods of data collection which were selected. I am using a qualitative approach which perceives the social world as constructed and interpreted rather than an externally objective reality to be verified or measured. The research question is focused on the understandings and motivations of actors in organisational contexts and the socio-technical interactions behind e-democracy initiatives. The chapter discusses how the methods fit together and are related to the research design. The methods used are documentary analysis of official documentation covering e-democracy and e-government, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I consider the ethical issues arising from the methods used in the data collection and show how these were identified and addressed. I examine some of the problems and issues of access to people and documentation and reflect on my own status as a researcher and a civil servant. In this chapter, I also discuss issues arising from data analysis, how data was collected and coded and considered.

Chapter 4 begins the empirical data analysis; I analyse official government documents for an understanding of the discourses and themes expressed about citizen/government interaction. I use the documents to consider both the continuities and changes in e-democracy policy and how understandings of e-democracy are shaped by ideas of reform and democracy. Government documents are integral to the business of government. Civil servants are key actors in the production and reception of documents. Drawing on the work of policy discourse analysts such as Fischer and Hajer, the chapter explores how official papers act as vehicles for discourses, expressing and reproducing norms and patterns of thought (Freeman and Maybin, 2011: 158) This chapter explores the function of documents in defining e-democracy in the context of other powerful discourses.

Chapter 5 focuses on actors' talk about e-democracy expressed through interviews and participant observation. Listening and analysing talk enables attitudes, perceptions and shared understandings to be uncovered that might otherwise be hard to discover. In day-to-day talk, ideas may not always be fully articulated, yet they are significant in shaping the choices officials make in considering who they want to reach, why and how. There has been relatively little work on exploring insider discourses in relation to democratic engagement and even less on how democratic engagement is implemented through digital technologies. This chapter seeks to explore the often implicit ideas that policy actors hold about 'the citizen' and their role in participating in government policy.

Chapter 6 examines e-democracy practices and behaviours and considers how practices develop and become routine and codified in organisations. I use the empirical data to show how the practices of e-democracy are shaped not only by wider discourses but also by the discursive constructions and negotiations of actors working in the field. The chapter examines how understandings of technology affect their selection, use and design of initiatives in the context of institutional environments. Policy actors have to make policies work in a complex and unstable landscape. Attention is also given in this chapter to the relationships and networks of policy actors working on e-democracy, their interactions with each other and with other parts of government. The effects and outcomes of these interactions on the shape of e-democracy are examined as policy actors seek to incorporate new ideas and emerging uses of technology.

The final chapter summarises the argument that the history and development of e-democracy in the UK can be more fully explained by focusing on the role of policy actors involved in shaping e-democracy. It sets out the findings based on the fieldwork and discusses the implications for future agendas. Based on the findings, explanations are offered regarding the

relative failure of e-democracy to date to achieve democratic renewal. Insights from the findings are discussed in relation to their contributions to the current literature. The relevance of the research to different audiences is explored in terms of differential impact. I end with observations about the continuing challenge of finding new ways to integrate e-democracy within government if the issue of democratic engagement is to be addressed.

Chapter 2: **Developments in e-democracy**

2.1 Conceptualising e-democracy

The body of knowledge surrounding e-democracy draws upon a wide range of theoretical approaches relevant to my thesis including democratic theory, organisational theory and theories of technologies. The aim of this chapter is to draw out insights from this variety of literatures to help answer the question; how do policy actors understand and enact e-democracy?

The chapter begins by looking at the origins of e-democracy in the UK, at the early focus of activity and policy directions, and exploring the influence on current forms of e-democracy. Analysis of the different characteristics of e-democracy presented in literature enables us to draw out some ambiguities surrounding the concept. It reveals the underlying contestations and struggles over meaning as e-democracy emerges as a policy theme. Section 2.2 situates e-democracy within the wider context of writings on democratic participation. Here attention is given to concerns expressed by government about value, levels and means of citizen participation, and how such concerns relate to the shape and progress of e-democracy. In this context, the literature on deliberative democracy is of relevance in considering how discursive concepts contributed to shaping e-democracy. To further explore policy actors' interpretations of e-democracy, section 2.3 draws upon policy discourse literature to examine how ideas and concepts structure and shape understandings, actions and relations between different policy actors. The policy discourse approach suggests that policy actors will interpret and draw upon wider discourses in their approach to e-democracy. In this literature, discourse is understood to be more than a means of describing or reflecting situations, it constructs a social reality. It enables some things to be made important and others insignificant within particular social, political and historical contexts and governs how people think and act. From this perspective we can see that practices do not stand 'outside' of discourse, instead, discourse constitutes practices.

The focus in the research question on policy actors implies that policy formation and delivery increasingly goes beyond the civil service to encompass involvement by various mixes and arrangements of private, public and not-for profit actors (Skelcher et al., 2005: 573). To this end, the studies on the impact of changing patterns of governance are used to examine participation of policy actors in the context of e-democracy. Links can be made here with the literature on the changing civil service, in particular, how bureaucratic processes and culture

interact with both democratic and managerial discourses. The literature on organisational structures, processes, cultures and organisational change is employed to better understand their effects on attitudes, behaviours and interactions. The work of public administration research on New Public Management (NPM) and Digital Era governance is studied to analyse the effects of administrative reforms on policy and policy actors.

Work on how technologies are socially constructed and enacted in organisations is a useful avenue to explore the interplay between socio-technical constructions, institutional contexts and practices. Section 2.5 looks at research on the social construction of technologies as a means of exploring more deeply the assumptions and requirements of policy actors in their selection of technologies to mediate e-democracy. Utilising this approach, what is emphasised and what is passed over in the implementation and use of technologies in this context can all be considered. These literatures help us to examine the underlying perceptions of actors, how technologies fit with organisational processes and capacities, and the implications of design for online citizen participation.

The last section of the chapter investigates two literatures that can help interrogate the nature of relationships and interactions between e-democracy policy actors. Work on network governance provides insights into issues and concerns that arise through forming and maintaining networks. It links with the earlier work on the shift from government to governance in its focus on the mechanisms and practices manifested through networks. By taking inspiration from Actor Network Theory (ANT) we can additionally pay attention to the tenuous connections and negotiations between actors. This enables socio-technical assemblages to be made more visible and for analysis of the materialisations of policy process that are an outcome of precarious linkages. The chapter concludes by assessing how this range of literatures from different disciplines and theoretical emphases can be brought together to consider the multi-dimensional, relational and contingent aspects of e-democracy (Parvez and Ahmed, 2007: 613, Mason, 2002: 79). To summarise, the purpose of this section has been to introduce the different literatures that are exploited in the thesis and to show their relevance in pursuit of discovering the interpretations and understandings policy actors have about e-democracy and the links between understandings and practices.

2.1.1 Conflicting understandings of what constitutes 'e-democracy'

In reviewing multiple and conflicting perspectives on e-democracy, we begin to see the questions that the thesis addresses around the input of policy actors, and their understandings and interactions with changing uses of technology. The concept of e-democracy has received

attention from a variety of academic disciplines including political science, sociology, public policy and computer science (Macintosh, 2004, Coleman and Moss, 2012, Hoff and Scheele, 2014, Berry and Moss, 2006). Governments and practitioners have also made contributions to the field. The number of journal articles and other literature has increased dramatically in the past decade (Lutz et al., 2014: 1) as new forms of e-democracy initiatives and new uses of digital technologies generate new research agendas. It is still an emerging research area and as such characterised by a variety of methodological, theoretical and normative perspectives (Medaglia, 2012: 346, Saebo et al., 2008: 28).

E-democracy is a hybrid, constructed concept (Macintosh et al., 2009: 1). It combines an implicit problem and offers a solution. The problem is that of democratic engagement, and technology is the means by which the problem might be solved. However e-democracy remains a poorly defined term encompassing a myriad of definitions and competing conceptualisations (Prachett, 2007: 4). Recent systematic literature reviews have noted that several analogous terms are used to describe technology facilitated means of supporting democratic decision making including e-participation, online participation, e-governance, e-government and e-voting (Rose and Sanford, 2007: 910, Medaglia, 2012: 346). There is no established or widely accepted common use of terms. Different authors select a term and define it for the purposes of their writing.

In this context, the conceptual relationship of e-democracy to e-government in the literature is worth exploring. The distinction between e-democracy and e-government can be blurred, particularly when separating what is understood as e-democracy from other applications of new technologies in the field of politics and public administration (Pratchett, 2006: 4). The development of e-government is also examined in the context of organisational reform but here, the focus is on different understandings in the literature of what constitutes e-government and the apparent convergence with e-democracy. Yildiz (2007) suggests the concept e-government has no universally accepted definition and this causes analytical difficulties. In part this is due to the failure of researchers to place e-government within its wider historical, political and cultural context rather than examining the outcomes and outputs.

Margetts (2009: 114) defines e-government as 'the use of by government of digital technologies internally and externally to interact with citizens, firms, other governments and organisational of all kinds.' In this she recognises e-government as encompassing both organisational reform and back-office functions and, as potentially transformative of the way governments communicate and interact with citizens. A number of writers focus on the

possible democratic benefits of e-government applications (Christensen and Laegreid, 2010, Baldwin et al., 2011, Savoldelli et al., 2014); with Freeman and Quirke (2013) suggesting that 'prospects of e-government have been idealised as heralding in a new era of democratic involvement, with opportunities for unmediated discussions, direct participation and representation, and greater transparency and accountability through political openness.' They acknowledge however that information dissemination and service delivery often dominate government practice because they offer governments the greatest chance for economic gains. Bekkers and Homburg (2007) suggest that e-government is seductive to governments due to a powerful mythical aspect of many e-government policies that technology by itself transforms government and enables citizens to be empowered. I return to the question of how these possible democratising effects of e-government influence understandings and practices in e-democracy in the empirical sections of the thesis.

Saebo and Rose use the term e-participation as a combination of 'participation', meaning joining in, either in the sense of taking part in some communal discussion or activity, or in the sense of taking some role in decision making. They seek to distinguish e-participation from e-democracy. E-participation is defined as a set of technology facilitated participatory processes (which may or may not be democratic or even in the political arena) whereas e-democracy embodies a more normative concern about how democracy should develop (Saebo et al., 2008: 5). Macintosh additionally suggests that e-democracy is more focused on developing the mechanisms of representative democratic decision making through technology:

> E-democracy is concerned with the use of information and communication technologies to engage citizens, support the democratic decision making processes and strengthen representative democracy.
>
> (Macintosh, 2004: 2)

Mackintosh was writing shortly after the publication of the UK government's green paper, *In the Service of Democracy* which divided e-democracy into two forms; e-voting and e-participation. E-voting was a strong focus of attention at this time for both academic and government research. The term 'e-democracy' has subsequently been used more flexibly by other writers (Coleman and Blumler, 2009, Chadwick, 2009, Prachett, 2007, Wright, 2006a). The concept tends to be more associated with government initiatives than citizen inspired activity but is not necessarily restricted to supporting representative democracy. Pratchett's description of e-democracy emphasises the institutional nature of e-democracy:

> Those ICT based initiatives that governments themselves are sponsoring as part of a process for improving the transparency and responsiveness of government, enhancing the participation of citizens in the policy process, or developing new opportunities for opinion formation and exchange among and between citizens. The focus, therefore, is explicitly top-down: attention is on what governments are doing to reinforce, reinvigorate or reinvent the institutions of democracy, rather than what citizens themselves are doing.
>
> (Prachett, 2007: 4)

For Pratchett, governments perceive opportunities in using Web technologies to enhance the democratic process. There are instrumental benefits to involving citizens in the business of government, as well as normative considerations. His definition is useful for the thesis in clarifying that e-democracy is government initiated; however it does not focus on how policy actors frame political questions or differences between groups of actors. Definitions and conceptualisations are inextricably linked; the confusion over terms used reflects the different interpretations held in the literature about what the model of e-democracy encompasses.

2.1.2 Development of e-democracy

The Web has always been strongly associated with ideas of empowerment, freedom and democratisation (Poster, 1995, Barlow, 1996, Rheingold, 2000, Berners-Lee and Fischetti, 2000). Although these perspectives often celebrated non-governmental activity, the idea of Web technologies having potential democratising properties was established. This cut across other debates that characterised technology as either a utopian liberator or highlighted the risk of technocratic dystopia (Coleman, 2005: 177). As some writers have noted, the introduction of new technologies have always raised both hope and fears about their role in citizen engagement; from the Napoleonic semaphore in 1795 (Peixoto, 2014) to the invention of television (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 11). Both optimism and pessimism about technologies continues to endure (see for example Elbæk and Lawson, 2014, Morozov, 2009).

However, claims that technologies have an inevitable trajectory towards either utopian or dystopian futures have been widely criticised as overly deterministic ((Ward and Vedel, 2006: 210, Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1999: 5). Although the thesis examines e-democracy, my starting point is that digital technologies are not inherently democratic; they may be adopted and used by institutional, political, or economic bodies to suppress democratic potential, for example through development of surveillance or tracking equipment. Coleman notes that a

dictatorship would choose and invest in different technologies to a populist democracy that might value technology that facilitate voting and opinion polls; while a more deliberative oriented democracy would develop technologies that allowed for structured discussion (Coleman and Shane, 2012: 381). Morozov (2009) argues that authoritarian regimes not only censor material, they use the Web to shape public opinion, just as previously they manipulated media such as newspapers, radio and TV.

A related discussion concerns whether digital technologies have revolutionary or normalising effects on democratic practices (Prachett, 2007: 3, Wright, 2012: 249). Initial attention was given to the opportunities for direct democracy in voting, referendums and e-petitions. Direct democracy was seen by some as a means of bypassing representative institutions and allowing input directly from citizens on a wide range of issues (Hilbert, 2009: 89). The Web facilitates much greater flows of information than were previously possible. Increased information potentially improves the social knowledge base and leads to a more informed citizenry (Reedy and Wells, 2009: 159). Citizens can thus vote directly and frequently on issues of concern to them. As with e-government, the belief that new technologies will *in themselves* radically change practices or institutions is essentially deterministic. This is not to suggest that the uses and effects of technological change are insignificant. Rather that the effects are variable, contingent upon particular activities, the institutional context and culture, as well as the affordances of particular technologies.

Other authors claim that far from revolutionising practices, the use of technologies is normalised by socio-political realities. Margolis and Resnick (2000) argue that potentially disruptive aspects of new technologies are defused by being incorporated or adapted by institutions into their standard processes. Agre (2002) refers to this process as the reinforcement model, suggesting that information technology is used to reinforce a system rather than change it. One example is that of e-voting, as a means of updating and improving the existing democratic practice of voting in elections (Office of the E-Envoy, 2002). In the early 2000s it was the focus of much institutional energy although concerns about security of votes were never resolved. The desire to bring in e-voting remains in some quarters, as the debate resurfaced in the 2015 general election (de Castella, 2015).

The background swirl of debates about the opportunities and risks associated with the use of the Web directly shape conceptualisations of e-democracy and what it could be. The promise of e-democracy rests on the claim that the Web offers potential to transform the democratic process by expanding and enhancing opportunities for citizen participation in the policy and

decision-making process (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 9, Dahlberg, 2001: 616, Hilbert, 2009: 92, Kakabase et al., 2003: 50). Particular affordances of the Web in e-democracy are a strong theme in much of the literature on e-democracy. The Web reduces spatial and temporal barriers allowing for citizens to make contributions even if they are physically distant from each other and to work asynchronously. Moreover the Web allows for much greater numbers to congregate in a virtually constructed social space (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 29).

Initially, the possibilities of direct and unmediated communication with policy makers were highlighted, but opportunities were unfulfilled not primarily because of technological issues but because of political and institutional unresponsiveness (Fung et al., 2013: 37). In the early 2000s government and practitioners' views of e-democracy were often centred on promoting and institutionalising deliberation and discussion. However, the difficulties faced by government in implementing e-deliberative initiatives included poor levels of participation, a lack of inclusiveness and the challenges of managing moderation (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 7, Loader and Mercea, 2011: 758). Disappointment with realising the democratic potential of the Web led to a sense of disillusionment and reduction of government activity, at least in terms of resources and policy initiatives (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 4, Chadwick, 2009: 16).

Initial enthusiasm for Web technologies in renewing democratic systems was followed by pessimism about apparent failures. This cycle is built on an essentially deterministic belief that the Web is uniquely different to other communication technologies (Ward and Vedel, 2006 510). The belief in the Web's transformative properties is an enduring component of organizational and political discourse (Bekkers and Homburg, 2007, Janssen et al., 2012). Understandings about technologies embed assumptions about their potential uses which relate to the political, cultural and social circumstances in which they are placed.

In particular, there are two developments in uses of web technologies that have a bearing on ideas about the shape of e-democracy. The first is what O'Reilly (2010) popularized as Web 2.0, although as he notes, Web 2.0 is not a new version of the World Wide Web but more of a rediscovery of the power hidden in the original design (O'Reilly, 2010: 12). Web 2.0 emphasises the role of user generated content in networked environments. Developments in the applications of social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook created renewed optimism for democratic possibilities on the Web (Loader and Mercea, 2011: 785). Social media is widely accessible and mobile, it connects people through networks in ways that some argue fundamentally reconfigures information flows and interactions of publics (Boyd, 2010: 7). Rhetoric around social media suggests that, for governments, Web 2.0 offers both risks and opportunities to increase their engagement with citizens. In the UK the Coalition

government, undertook a number of crowdsourcing initiatives in which they asked citizens to suggest solutions to policy problems. The literature examines the premise that increased use of social media and its absorption into mundane practices, offers potential to re-energise democratic politics (Coleman and Moss, 2013, Loader and Mercea, 2011: 759) although such influence is indeterminate and contingent on other actors and activities.

A further significant development that bears upon ideas of e-democracy is the discussion on how the Web can be used to support democratic citizenship through 'open government' (Mayo and Steinburg, 2007, Fung and Kosack, 2014, Lathrop and Laurel, 2010), a central theme of the open data agenda. The premise of open government is that through making public information and data more widely available; transparency and accountability of government will be increased. In examining the role of open government and open data in influencing ideas of e-democracy, there are several research avenues to be followed up in the thesis. The first of these is the merging of concepts of open government and open data so that the language of democratic participation is employed in the development of the open data agenda. Yu and Robinson (2012) note that the concept of open government derives from campaigns to get governments to disclose sensitive information while open technology refers to data that is made publicly available. Open data does not on its own ensure democratic accountability. Without access or means of interpretation, data users will have no effective means to influence decision-makers. Bates (2013) suggests that this confusion between terms is intentional on behalf of elites, a means of bringing in potentially disruptive campaigners under the open government umbrella. A further line of research focuses on how officials understand and apply concepts of open data in relation to their power and democratic participation. Peled (2011) found that in the US, federal agencies saw information as a valuable commodity to bargain with. This made them reluctant to release some types of information, although they released large quantities of what they considered insignificant information. This illustrates that data is not neutral it is shaped and defined by people in government. Coleman and Moss (2013) note that an important question for extending the democratic value of open government is in examining the understandings of officials about what data is released, how it is released and how it links with decision making processes.

In this discussion, we began with an exploration of the multiple and at times conflicting definitions of what constitutes e-democracy. This messy situation is not one in which one definition prevails over others, rather it is a recognition of the complexity and contestation that exists around the possibilities for e-democracy. To label something is not just to describe a phenomena but to construct or enact it, to make it happen (Law and Urry, 2004: 395).

Conflicts between definitions are rooted in how different groups and interests interpret e-democracy and how they seek to embed their understandings as the accepted norm.

This analysis illuminates some of the wider understandings policy actors employ in relation to ideas about citizen participation and uses of technology. We have traced how ideas about the Web and democracy are connected to the forms of e-democracy that achieve prominence at different times. Initially ideas of unmediated access to policy makers shaped online forums. These gave way to more discursive online opportunities and subsequently, an increased emphasis on the connectivity of social media as well as links made between open data and democratic engagement in government. It raises questions to be more fully explored in the thesis about how the nexus of discourse, technological affordances and interactions between actors works in specific contexts.

2.2 Exemplifying democratic participation

Discussions about e-democracy cannot be separated from consideration of how it is situated within wider discussions about democracy and participation. Public participation was already a long-standing concern of governments when the Web emerged into the public sphere in the early 1990s. There is a substantial body of literature that investigates the push for wider citizen participation and assesses the benefits of democratic participation for governments (for example van Deth, 2001, Parry et al., 1992, Warren, 2002). The disengagement and disillusionment expressed by citizens' calls for a response from government to restore perceptions of democratic legitimacy. Political leaders feel compelled to find ways of closing the communicative gap between the governing elite and citizens (Coleman and Shane, 2012: 25).

A number of authors argue that reforms to political parties or parliamentary processes are not sufficient to address the political malaise. More is needed to reshape the relationship between government and citizens, one that finds new ways to express democratic values and principles (Smith, 2011: 33, Dahlgren, 2009: 14, Coleman and Shane, 2012: 24). Hay and Stoker suggest that the remedy is a new space created to reanimate and revitalise politics, a space in which there is public and visibly deliberative decision making (Hay and Stoker, 2009: 235). The Web appears to offer such a space, allowing the distance between governing and governed to be reduced through the use of digital technologies. This promises more immediate and direct connection with policy makers: revitalising engagement in politics, increasing knowledge of politics and information about policy issues and reducing levels of scepticism about politicians and political institutions (Ward and Vedel, 2006: 213).

Increasing public involvement has instrumental benefits for governments. There are arguments that broader participation in policymaking improves the quality of decision making through tapping into new or broader sources of knowledge, experience and networks. Discussion and deliberation are said to realise inclusive, informed and negotiated policy formation and decision-making (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 2). Collaborative models of policy making can generate new ideas and creativity, provide a stronger evidence base and can challenge established practices. (Kakabase et al., 2003, OECD, 2003, HM Government., 2012a).

Perspectives about the role of digital technologies in overcoming the democratic deficit suggest that technology offers new potential to engage citizens by overcoming temporal and spatial issues and providing new spaces for discussion. Proponents of deliberative democracy were quick to see the advantages the Web offered in overcoming previously intractable barriers to effective public deliberation (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 32, Dahlberg, 2001: 840, Albrecht, 2006: 63). However, researchers have also highlighted that online citizen participation replicates asymmetries in power offline, leading to inequalities in how different discourses are enabled and fostered online (Dahlberg, 2007, Zhang, 2010). Discussions about citizen participation cannot focus only on technological solutions; they also need to embrace a more holistic approach to understanding government approaches to democratic participation.

2.2.1 Influence of deliberative theory on e-democracy

Much of the literature on participation in general and on what constitutes e-democracy in particular is concerned not only with whether participation takes place but also its quality and impact. Ideas about using the Web as a space for deliberative exchange were prevalent at the time that e-democracy emerged. Traditional consultation mechanisms were widely critiqued because they offered only individual input or feedback on issues, whereas deliberation potentially results in more in-depth and collective consideration and understanding (Woodford and Preston, 2013: 356). Deliberative democracy continues to be a strongly supported position within democratic theory (Bohman, 1998, Chambers, 2003, Dahlberg, 2001, Gutmann and Thompson, 2004). Deliberative democrats argue that interests and preferences are not necessarily fixed, and opinions can change through reasoned discussion thus enhancing the vitality of political institutions (Dahlgren, 2009). The argument is that policy formation and decision making benefits from public deliberation because people contribute individual and collective knowledge and experience and also because if following fair, inclusive and just rules of discourse, they are likely to reach just conclusions (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 17).

Chadwick suggests the ideal of the deliberative public sphere has probably been the most influential concept in scholarly writing on e-democracy (Chadwick, 2009: 13). He is critical of those who focus on online deliberation practices in preference to other forms of online participation because the ideals of deliberation are very demanding and rarely realised in practice. Deliberation places expectations on individuals to meet requirements in terms of reasoned argument, information, inclusivity, and non-coerciveness. The emphasis on deliberation potentially leads to other non-deliberative participatory Web-based practices being overlooked (Chadwick, 2009: 17). Young (2001) suggests that too strong a focus on deliberation excludes potential participants. More inclusiveness can be achieved through different approaches to discussion incorporating testimony, images, or playfulness. These also have an important part to play in disturbing complacency and raising questions. The alternatives to deliberative discussion are often undervalued by those who design online participative spaces and their significance in different uses of technology or with particular social networks has not yet been fully explored.

The influence of deliberative theory on the government's approach to e-democracy in the early to mid-2000s can be seen both in the application of large scale discussion forums and smaller more policy focused discussion forums set up between 2000 and 2008 (Hansard Society, 2005-2008) It is acknowledged that many of these early initiatives were not very successful and such forums were also demanding for the civil servants who had to manage them. (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 5, Chadwick, 2009: 17, Wright, 2006a: 242). A number of studies have further suggested that civil servants were resistant to using deliberative processes in policy because they see it as a dilution of the power of representation (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 15, Woodford and Preston, 2013: 358). The allegation that civil servants deflect participatory processes either because they see it as a threat to their own power or as undermining representative democracy is a theme that will be picked up in the empirical work of the thesis.

Whilst acknowledging the challenges involved, Coleman advocates 'a more deliberative democracy' which embraces the internet's capacity to support deliberation although he is not discounting the importance of other non-deliberative practices in enacting democracy (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 2). Several writers have demonstrated that government run deliberation forums can be successful, even in complex policy areas if consideration is given to context and design (Ferguson, 2008, Fung, 2006, Dryzek and Hendriks, 2012, Woodford and Preston, 2013). Skilled moderators can manage discussion in a transparent and balanced way, enabling participants to contribute and also trust the process, thus enhancing its legitimacy. The significance of deliberative approaches, particularly in the government's first phase of

e-democracy should not be underestimated but application of deliberation is only one aspect of what is shaping evolving forms of e-democracy. Other contingent factors include the development of what Loader calls the 'second generation of internet democracy' focus on networked and co-constructed technologies (Loader and Mercea, 2011: 760) and the wider organisational and political shift from government to governance modes of operation involving new actors and networks in the enacting of e-democracy.

2.2.2 Inclusion and access

Hopes were initially high that Web technologies could make politics more inclusive by providing more people with information and a democratic structure, the Web would facilitate deliberative conversations. (Albrecht, 2006: 64, Davis, 2009: 747, Wright, 2012: 245) Inclusion is seen as a core principle of democracy by Saward (2003) because 'it is difficult to see how anything other than an inclusive, involving form of institutionalising political equality can be acceptable democratically' (Saward, 2003: 162). Who is included or excluded has implications for e-democracy policy options. Inequality in the ways people connect to and make use of Web technologies is also a form of democratic exclusion.

The relationship between social inequalities and Web technologies is more complex than the notion of a 'digital divide' implies (Halford and Savage, 2010: 937). Initial understandings of who was included conceived of a binary division between citizens who had access to ICT and those who lacked access either to the means of connection or in computer literacy. Official and academic studies have equated digital inequality with social exclusion, highlighting socio-economic status, education, age, geography and ethnicity as factors (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008: 26, Social Exclusion Unit, 2005: 18, Longley and Singleton, 2009). More sophisticated studies on digital exclusion suggest that the possession of social, economic and technological capital is an important aspect of individuals' and organisations' ability to access and effectively engage with ICT (Selwyn, 2004, Eynon and Geniets, 2012).

Government activity is predominantly focused on access to government services and transactions rather than ensuring that e-democratic initiatives are accessible and inclusive. Much of the emphasis is on 'digital by default' with the emphasis on the cost saving advantages to government (HM Government., 2012b: 11, 16). Many studies therefore have focused on examining why people do not, or cannot, access services online rather than exploring the democratic implications. Yet if inclusion is fundamental to democracy then consideration should also surely be given to inclusion in e-democracy – 'to be disconnected is

to be disenfranchised' (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 3). Inequality is not just about access to ICT but also about the social, political and cultural capital needed to navigate sites, assess information, formulate views, express opinions and so on. Limited ability to meaningful participation, constrained alternatives and hegemonic discourse demonstrate substantive inequality. The consequences for e-democracy are severe; instead of balancing the traditional inequality of access to politics, the Web can magnify and reinforce existing problems (Mossberger, 2010: 174). But, there are also questions to be explored about whether social media and mobile technologies are altering differential access and use for different social and age groups.

Design of e-democracy initiatives is a significant aspect of discussions on democratic and inclusive participation (for example Brundidge and Rice, 2009, Fung, 2006, Smith, 2009). In this context research has shown that online spaces need to be complemented by communicative practices to facilitate more open discursive contestation. Moderation and design can make a difference to the nature and inclusivity of online discussion and other forms of e-democracy (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 93-95, Wright and Street, 2007, Wojciechowska, 2014).

My thesis is concerned with analysing the ways in which policy actors' understandings interact with and influence practices of democratic participation in situated contexts. This area of research is relevant to my thesis in its consideration of the multiple and contingent aspects of democratic participation and uses of Web technologies. This approach goes beyond considering issues of access or structural sources of disadvantage as isolated or independent elements to be resolved and seeks to consider ideas of deliberation in conjunction with wider understandings of inclusiveness and access to decision making.

2.3 Policy actors and discursive constructions

2.3.1 Beyond the civil service

My research investigates the role of policy actors, working in or with the UK government, their relationship with the civil service and how this shapes e-democracy. I start with the recognition that the civil service is no longer the sole developer or deliverer of policy (if it ever was). A range of public, private and not for profit organisations are increasingly involved in all aspects of the policy process. There is a long standing academic discussion about how far a fundamental shift from government to governance is underway (Barnes et al., 2007: 217). Governance is a response to the recognition of the limits of traditional forms of top–down

government in the face of the growing fragmentation, complexity, and dynamism of contemporary societies (Sorensen and Torfing, 2011: 843). This has resulted in a significant transformation in which multiple public, private and not-for-profit actors join together in shifting configurations to shape, make and implement policy (Skelcher et al., 2005: 573). Beyond the managerial and administrative changes, the idea of 'governance' expands the concept of 'government' to include networks of governmental and non-governmental bodies, changing the role of government towards one of 'steering' policy delivery (Rhodes, 1997).

Such governance networks offer governments the promise of participation, coordination and collaboration when they might want to step back from imposing solutions (Keevers et al., 2008: 466). The organisational and political shift towards actors outside government raises issues for governments in terms of control and democratic accountability but also offers new opportunities for democratic innovation. Warren (2009) argues there are good reasons why administrators and policy-makers are interested in 'governance driven democratization' to overcome political and policy gridlock. The significance for this thesis is that rather than restricting the discussion about e-democracy to civil servants, the examination of understandings and practices of e-democracy must encompass a wider group of policy actors who work with civil servants but who have a role that goes beyond delivery. As Skelcher suggests: 'They deal with normative questions to do with both the ends and means of public policy, and have a degree of discretion in resolving these.' (Skelcher et al., 2005: 575). In this respect, exploring the understandings policy actors draw upon in relation to e-democracy is significant and allows greater insight into the constitution of e-democratic initiatives.

2.3.2 Policy discourse approach

Earlier in the chapter, the nature of terms such as democracy and participation were discussed. These concepts are put together in particular ways and in doing so they structure perceptions and actions in some directions rather than others. In this section, research on policy discourse is employed to understand how policy actors are shaped by and shape particular discourses and narratives in which some things become important and others insignificant and entail the inclusion of some participants and organisations and marginalisation of others (Fischer, 2006: 25). Policy making is constructed through the ongoing discursive struggle over definitions and conceptual framing of problems (Fischer and Gottweiss, 2012: 9). Recognising the importance of discourse can help us understand how policy actors draw on the meanings that are associated with e-democracy to develop and justify practices. Discourses structure action by shaping what is seen as normative or problematic, for change or continuity (Skelcher et al., 2005: 577, Fischer, 2006: 25). It is by unpacking how ideas of e democracy are perceived and

employed that explanations can be offered about why e-democracy takes its current form. The discourse on e-democracy does not stand alone but is nestled within wider more overarching discourses.

There are different traditions of discourse analysis which are derived from various interpretations of the meaning of discourse (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). The understanding of discourse here is informed by the work of Foucault as it relates to social power. A discourse from this perspective circumscribes the range of subjects and objects through which people experience the world and specifies the views that can be legitimately accepted as knowledge. The power of discourse lies in constituting and shaping social reality and governing the paths of action that appear to be available (Keevers et al., 2008: 461). This analysis of discourse can be placed in the interpretative or social constructionist tradition in the social sciences. This tradition assumes the existence of multiple, socially constructed realities instead of a single reality, governed by immutable natural laws. When reality is seen as socially constructed, the analysis of meaning becomes central (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005: 176). Discourse at the macro level operates at a sub-conscious level, transmitting basic values and is often perceived as self-evident and rational, requiring detailed analysis to draw out underlying interpretations.

However, complex phenomena have to be rendered linguistically intelligible so that the perceived problem becomes something that can be described and debated. To this end, actors deploy narratives to frame ideas and themes. Storylines are shortened narratives to which different actors subscribe even though they may disagree about important aspects. A storyline acts as an organising mechanism for bringing diverse actors together and for structuring actions (Hajer, 1993). The concept of storylines will be considered in the thesis as a means of understanding how different groups of actors approach e-democracy. The storyline works as a 'shorthand' narrative for discussions, assuming that other actors will understand what is meant. The assumption of mutual understanding, however widespread, is often false, concealing discursive complexity (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005: 177) In an example of how storylines work, Hajer (1993) shows how the idea of 'acid rain' both conceptualised a problem and shaped responses to it, despite differences between actors. In a similar fashion, we can surmise that the idea of 'e-democracy' also describes a policy problem and in doing so, is able to organise disparate groups to find solutions in response.

Within discourses there are always conflicting, unresolved elements, discourses are not static and what is considered authoritative and legitimate changes over time due to inherent contradictions, challenges to the dominant discourses and emergence of new circumstances.

Social actors are both the products of the current situation and agents for change (Fischer and Gottweiss, 2012: 12). The literature on policy discourse shifts the focus from structures and processes towards an examination of the underlying struggle to establish meanings as legitimate.

2.3.3 Modernisation of government

Discourses around e-democracy do not exist in a vacuum and are likely to be shaped by other, more dominant discourses present within government. Prominent in policy and governance over recent decades are ideas linked to neo-liberal and economic rationalist public policy (Keevers et al., 2008: 462). A distinct emphasis of this discourse in the UK has focused on the need for government to modernise.

Modernisation of government is particularly associated with New Labour (Ahmad and Broussine, 2003, Fenwick and McMillan, 2012, Newman, 2001: 1) but modernisation is a global phenomenon derived from government responses to increasingly complex and diverse societies in which many policy problems, such as environmental issues, are unresolvable by single nation-states (OECD, 2005). The discourse on the modernisation of government is presented as an imperative, an economic and social necessity in the face of globalisation (Ahmad and Broussine, 2003: 48). The post-war welfare state settlement, based on the state as the direct service provider with large bureaucratic state organisations dispensing services, became increasingly unsustainable, pushing governments towards more market orientated models (Newman, 2001: 14). In the 1980s and 1990s, neo-liberal economic and political changes were brought in by Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK. The changes were most clearly manifested in managerial reforms to the public sector (Hood, 1991, Skelcher et al., 2005: 573). However modernisation of public administrative arrangements were also closely linked to institutions of public governance, leading to what Rhodes described as a 'hollowing out' of government from large state bodies towards a multiplicity of institutions and actors (Rhodes, 1994).

New Labour's interpretation of modernisation contained many strands of continuity with earlier administrations but it also sought to re-imagine modernisation through articulation of a 'Third Way' between market individualisation and a state centred approach (Newman, 2001: 1). The core of New Labour's modernisation programme was focused on public sector reform in which efficiency and value for money were central. Labour's enthusiasm for technology as a means of solving problems became an emblem of modernisation (HM Government., 1999, Coleman and Moss, 2013: 3).

The Coalition government continued some elements of Labour's approach to modernisation, particularly in terms of continuing reforms to the public sector and in some of their initial rhetoric about the big society (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2010: 22). These aspects were combined with more traditionally conservative approaches towards the marketisation of services. They also embraced technology in the form of peer production, crowdsourcing and co-production of services, offering potential for both a move away from the state and further public service cuts (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2010: 15, Coleman and Moss, 2013: 13).

Labour under Gordon Brown and the Coalition Government were attracted to the use of Web technologies in developing open government data (OGD). The open data agenda draws upon the modernisation discourse in its concerns with making government transparent and accountable and consequently more efficient and cost effective. OGD is also sometimes aligned to the literature on e-democracy due to claims about the radical transformation of British politics, in which information technology and the pro-active disclosure of official information empowers individual citizens with respect to both their elected politicians and the administrative state (McClean, 2011). The development of OGD can be linked to earlier campaigns for 'freedom of information and to an extent it draws its democratic credentials from that arena. As Freeman and Quirke (2013) note, these are important democratic developments but, by themselves, such applications do not enable civic input into political agendas and policy processes. Deliberative and other forms of democratic engagement are very different for citizens to the routine release of large scale datasets. Access to information is one thing, but realising the benefits depends on the citizen being able to interpret the information and use it for democratic purposes.

Other writers have talked about the operation of discourse as a cloaking mechanism around the open data agenda. Yu and Robinson (2012) discuss the ambiguity of the term 'open government' which describes government as open politically, that is government that is transparent and accessible, and the use of the same term for open data technologies. They point out that data can be openly available (on transport systems for instance) but this has no bearing on whether the government is democratically accountable to citizens. Bates (2013) argues that more radical ideas on participation have been domesticated. She suggests neo-Gramscian notions of hegemony and *trasformismo* explain how counter-hegemonic ideas are subjugated. By adopting the terms 'open', 'transparent' or 'participative' purposely to structure the open data narrative, the state has been able to incorporate more radical actors and potentially dangerous ideas to an agenda that focuses more on marketization than democratisation (Bates, 2013: 135). In this analysis, linguistic ambiguity is a deliberate strategy by elites to use participatory language to mask its ulterior meaning.

2.3.4 Making citizens through discourse

Alongside discourses on modernisation and transparency, there is an underlying discourse about citizens. This frames understandings of participation and sets the context in which decisions about processes, tools and techniques are made (Collins and Ison, 2006). Citizenship is a fluid and widely contested concept (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 4). The citizen is not a naturally occurring phenomenon but a constructed notion (Coleman and Moss, 2012: 1, Newman et al., 2004: 210). Conceptualisation of 'the public' with whom officials engage are likely to be significant in determining which citizens are drawn into participation and how their roles and identities are constituted within participation mechanisms (Newman et al., 2004: 7).

In their framing of policy problems, policy actors structure participation opportunities in one direction rather than another. Work such as that carried out by Newman et al (2004) or Coleman and Firmstone (2014) analyses how officials frame citizen participation as most appropriate at the local level and in relation to commenting on service provision rather than on policy formation or decision-making. Coleman (2009) suggests that civil servants may resist making citizen participation more meaningful because they fear their power will be diluted. Officials may highlight the complexity of specific policy areas and ask whether this limits the possibilities for citizen involvement. In Woodford's (2013) research on policy formulation, the citizen's role was typically cast as essentially consultative. Such studies raise important questions for my thesis as to whether policy actors frame e-democracy policy to maintain their dominant position in policy making.

In a study of the implementation of the Sustainable Communities Act, Bua (2014) found that the official perception of 'the ordinary citizen' was often defined by their lack of ordinariness or representativeness. The idea of the 'ordinary person' was embedded as an evaluative measure but because it was difficult to define what constituted 'ordinary', officials tended to reference, in an often hostile fashion, groups or individuals taking part who were perceived as somehow 'not ordinary'. The reality fell short of the imaginary construct and that impacted on official evaluation of the participatory exercise (Bua, 2014: 136). The findings in his study raises the possibility that by having an imaginary construct in mind, policy actors may implicitly denigrate the people who take part in participatory exercises. Although the concept of citizen participation engenders positive rhetoric from governments the enacting of participation in specific contexts is often more complex.

Discourse shapes understandings of who the citizen is and the contribution expected from them. Studies such as Coleman and Moss (2012) examine the constructed nature of the citizen

and how that interacts with forms of e-democracy and organisational goals. In particular, Bua's (2014) study on citizen participation illustrates how officials equated certain types of citizens with the participation they envisaged. This shaped both how they commissioned and implemented the designs and how they evaluated the responses. Fenwick and McMillan (2012) argue that there is an implicit but crucial link between the idea of active citizenship and improvement in public services. An empowered citizen can make choices about services and service levels and for example, make responsible choices in health and education. Modernising ideas about improved public services in this conceptualisation emphasises certain forms of participatory input.

From this perspective the analysis makes visible the underlying policy issues, agendas, problematisations and claims shaping e-democracy. It examines the conditions that create the discourses and asks how are they transmitted and reproduced? A further set of questions examines how they are contested and who are the actors involved? The role of discourse in constituting and shaping social reality in e-democracy is a significant avenue of enquiry for this thesis.

2.4 Organisational effects

E-democracy is situated in government organisations and there is a varied and substantial literature on organisational change and decision-making (Campbell, 2004: Chapter 1, March and Olsen, 1984, Provan and Lemaire, 2012, Zucker, 1987). These offers insights into the role rules, norms, hierarchies and resources play in shaping e-democracy. Similarly, research on the interaction of technology and organisations is highly relevant here, helping us to explore how technologies shape organisational needs and goals and, in particular, how emergent technologies are changing the civil service (Dunleavy, 2012, Fountain, 2005, Halford et al., 2008, Pollitt, 2011). Much less is known however, about how the interactional dynamics of new technologies and organisational change may be influencing opportunities for online democratic participation.

The previous section discussed the role and discourses of policy actors who operate with but are external to the civil service in e-democracy. The importance of the shift from government to governance is discussed in the literature but there is a risk that as a result the significance of the civil service is overlooked. The civil service and civil servants remain crucial in all stages of e-democracy policy and in this section their role is more fully discussed. There are different perspectives on understanding how the civil service is, or should be, organised. The traditional model of the civil service, often known as the Whitehall or Westminster model adheres to key

characteristics of hierarchical bureaucratic structures, organised on a functional basis, as the mechanism through which policy is implemented (Pyper and Burnham, 2011: 191). This has a continuing narrative power although it has been criticised for its analytical impoverishment and historical weakness. The focus of this model was on a small group of senior civil servants and their relationships with government ministers. It presented an image of a 'golden age' against which the present day is compared unfavourably (Pyper and Burnham, 2011).

The civil service is often perceived as the archetypal bureaucracy. The Weberian bureaucratic model, characterised by set rules and procedures within strict lines of control and authority, centralisation and formalisation (Exworthy and Halford, 1999: 11, Pyper and Burnham, 2011: 191) remains such a dominant paradigm of thinking about organisations, particularly in the public sector, that all other models tend to be measured against it. At all levels within and across departments, a multitude of relationships and networks are generating knowledge, norms and expectations.

In response to long standing criticisms of bureaucratic rigidity and departmentalism in the public sector, new sets of remedies and practices appeared in the 1970s and 1980s known as New Public Management (NPM) which promised a fusion of the best practices of the public and private sectors (Exworthy and Halford, 1999: 27). Public administration literature is dominated by the New Public Management (NPM) agenda in government organisations (Hood, 1991, Bevir, 2011). NPM is a product of wider discourses on modernisation; it signifies a shift from bureaucratic administration by civil servants to a much broader group of policy actors who are involved in devising and implementing policy.

The institutional logic of NPM focused on efficiency, increased productivity, and decentralization (Hood, 1991). In the UK, it was shaped by the Conservative government's adoption of private sector mechanisms, like competition and contracts, as a means to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and allocation of resources in publics service delivery (Coule and Patmore, 2013: 982). As a number of writers have noted, the long term contracting out of expertise has a continued impact on government IT systems and internal skills and capacities (Halford et al., 2008, Horrocks, 2009, Chadwick, 2011). This also has consequences for the imagining, commissioning and implementation of e-democratic initiatives.

Not all components of NPM are consistently applied or are necessarily directly in conflict with the bureaucratic model. New forms of management do not always displace older methods but are practised alongside them. Government organisations do not conform to a single model but in highlighting particular concerns and solutions the models inform us about how problems, priorities and allocation of resources are framed. A notable feature of the civil

service has been its adaptability to change and in many ways it has managed to incorporate features of NPM while retaining the overall bureaucratic structure. As Rhodes points out in his analysis of the modernising reforms of the Labour government, there was both more centralisation through No 10 and the Cabinet Office and, at the same time, greater devolution of powers to agencies and other bodies (Rhodes, 2000: 160) An examination of the civil service suggests that rather than bureaucracy being superseded as a mode of organisation, recent changes are reconfiguring or hybridising more traditional bureaucratic forms (Watson, 2012: 134) as a means of resolving tension between market pressures and bureaucratic administration.

NPM with its strong emphasis on corporate management and organisational structures pre-dated the internet and did not fully take account of the developing impacts of the Web. Increasingly, writers link the use of digital technologies to public administration and to new waves of reform. Dunleavy and Margetts refer to 'digital-era governance' as the successor to NPM. They highlight the key effects of digitalisation in government as reintegrating government services, holistic delivery of services (one stop shops) and digitalisation of administration. The change they suggest is driven by the accumulated paradoxes of NPM made particularly apparent in times of economic austerity but also by the range and speed of technological developments. Web 2.0 uses increase social networking and enable rich forms of media handling leading to significant ramifications in the way citizens interact with government (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2010: 4). Much of the focus in studying the impact of technologies on governance is on the implementation of e-government processes (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2010, Horrocks, 2009). There is much less research into how policy actors navigate and work within the changing structures and logics of governance with regard to evolving forms of e-democracy.

2.4.1 Effects of reform of civil service and budget cuts

Reform of the civil service is a perennial concern of governments (Rhodes, 2000: 151). The reform agenda may change emphasis with different administrations but there are core continuities with the modernisation discourse of reducing costs and improving efficiency. A key area for reform, and for some the dominant concern, is the cost of the civil service, workforce and pensions, estates and running departments. This was always an important concern but was given added impetus by the financial crisis of 2008. In the 2010 Spending Review, administration budgets for departments were cut by a third. Recent figures seem to show that the cuts were largely implemented as this example from one government department indicates:

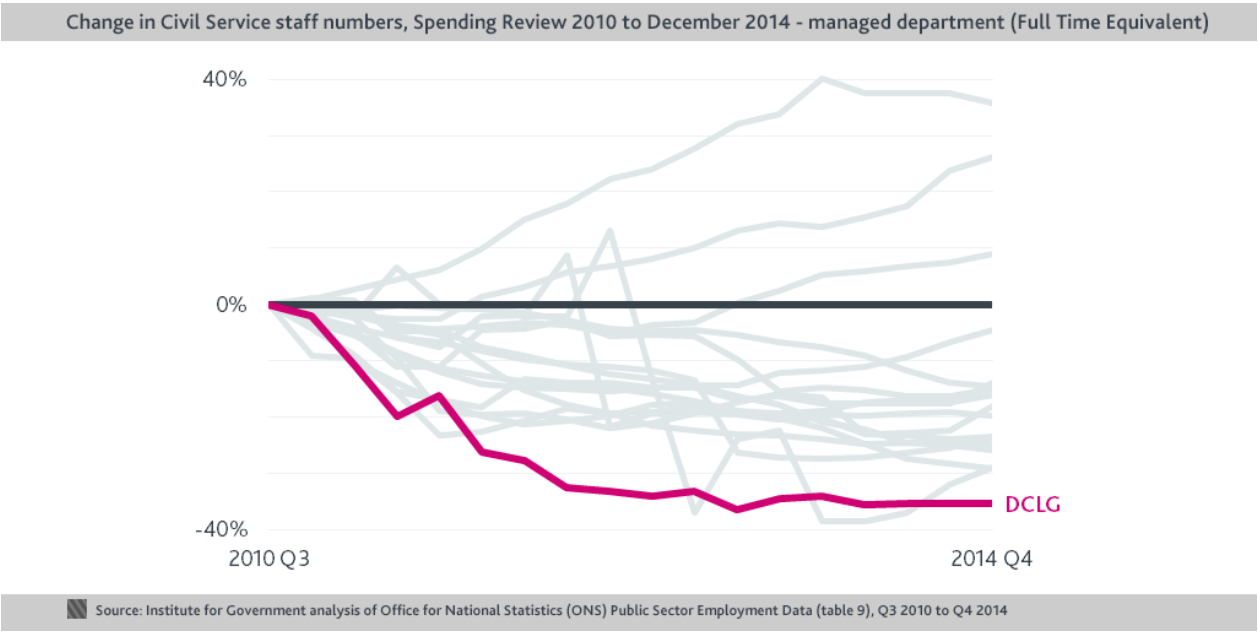

Figure 1: DCLG change in staff numbers 2010-2014 (Whitehall Monitor, 2014)

Further cuts of 25 percent or 40 percent for unprotected departments have been demanded in the 2015 Spending Review (Perraudin, 2015). Digitalisation of government services is an important part of the government strategy in reducing costs. UK government research found the average cost of a central government digital transaction to be almost 20 times lower than the cost of telephone ones and 50 times lower than face to face transactions (HM Government., 2012b: 8). The drive towards digitalisation is strong but there are potential conflicts with reducing other costs. Under a scenario discussed by Dunleavy and Margetts (2010: 28) austerity could mean that government administration especially the online operations of public services will fall progressively further behind the technologies of private sector organisations, the gap will increase and make it difficult for governments to catch up and at the same time public sector pay freezes will make it harder to recruit expert staff.

The impact on expertise and investment in technologies within government also has implications for e-democracy initiatives. Reduced budgets mean that there is less money to spend on creative or innovative designs, civil servants have to take into account the cost of projects, the time they run them for and how resource intensive they are to manage. Fewer staff in government departments are available or expert in developing and running initiatives. Prioritisation of more tangible and quantifiable e-government projects may further reduce the capacity for e-democracy within government.

While reform is usually presented as business like and pragmatic in making the civil service comparable to the private sector (HM Government., 2012a: 3), there is also a narrative thread that highlights the importance of reform to citizens. Modernisation in government is intended

to make civil servants more responsive, more collaborative and working in partnership rather than in isolation (Ahmad and Broussine, 2003: 46). The language of participation is borrowed when applied to reform of government practices (Bevir, 2006: 427). This perspective will be explored in the thesis by considering whether actors use participative language to achieve non-participatory goals (such as saving money). There is also a question to explore as to whether online opportunities (even those not badged as participative) have democratic effects beyond the intentions of officials by opening up the possibility for wider public input on decision-making.

2.4.2 Civil servants perspectives on e-democracy

Despite normative anxiety from political and democratic theorists on the parlous state of democracy, there is little published work exploring the motivations of officials towards online or offline citizen participation at the national level. Some authors have suggested that civil servants perceive increased citizen participation as a threat to their power (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 15, Woodford and Preston, 2013: 358) but empirical research exploring motivations has been scant. There is some research which investigates civil servants' attitudes to e-government. This suggests that officials often have a sceptical approach to the implementation of digital technologies in their work. Studies in Norway and New Zealand indicate that civil servants tended to perceive the effects of Web technologies for implementing e-government processes as more effective than for e-democracy procedures. (Baldwin et al., 2011, Christensen and Lægreid, 2010).

The study in New Zealand asked civil servants how Web technologies would affect citizen participation. 83 percent of civil servants thought they would improve participation but further reading shows that most considered this to consist of better, more accessible information and an improvement in the citizen-government relationship through better service provision (Baldwin et al., 2011: 116-7). The research amongst civil servants in Norway found that civil servants perceived the strongest effects of ICT on administrative coordination and control. Effects were also seen as significant on public services quality and transparency. However the civil servants were much less certain about impacts on citizen participation (Christensen and Laegreid, 2010: 18). .A recent survey of 1300 civil servants in the UK carried out for Dods Research (Northgate Public Services, 2014) showed that 84 percent felt that contributions from citizens would improve policy. Again though, more detailed reading shows that the questions were framed very much in terms of reducing costs and predominantly focused at local provision of services.

A different but related insight can be found in a study of senior civil servants' conceptions of accountability. The research discovered that multiple, differing and sometimes conflicting notions of accountability were held by officials. Some understood accountability in terms of the success of projects, others saw is as justification to parliament, and others again (a smaller number) understood it as ensuring public validation. Only a minority of civil servants in the study considered their work in the context of the wider public interest, the majority were more concerned with meeting performance targets or facing parliamentary committees (Lupson and Partington, 2011: 914). This is a partial but tantalising insight into the mind-set of senior civil servants and one that has implications how e-democracy is conceptualised and evaluated.

In this thesis, the understandings of civil servants and other policy actors are explored though their interaction with the situated context of e-democracy within government. New and emergent forms of organisation such as NPM, digital era governance and network governance both combine and conflict with existing bureaucratic forms of organisation. The focus on organisation directs attention to the importance of context in determining how actions are performed. In understanding context, the contingent, complex interrelatedness among of technologies and organisational processes is additionally entwined with constraints such as austerity measures in producing unforeseen effects.

2.5 Understandings and uses of technology

Many writings about the revolutionary aspects of technology are underpinned by a deterministic assumption that technological development drives social change, and technological progress follows a predictable linear path from problem to solution. From this perspective, technology produces social and organisational change but is not in turn influenced by society or the organisations to which it is applied. It is seen as a neutral and inevitable force. This promotes a passive attitude to technological change (Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1999: 5) as though technology possessed an innate quality that forces human beings to act in a particular way (Wright, 2012: 246). Such a perspective emphasises the potential effects of technology over the way technology is implemented by institutions, the influence of the political and institutional context, and the interaction of human agency and social structures which shape the flow of political information.

The idea of transformation through application of digital technologies is as Bekkers and Homberg (2007) suggest a dominant, powerful and mythical component to many e-government policies. It implies that technology enables or causes public sector agencies to transform themselves from inefficient, separate and inward looking entities to joined-up,

accessible, citizen-oriented businesses. Underlying this core myth of a new and improved government through technology, other myths such as the inevitability of technological progress, the rationality of planning and the myth of empowered citizens also play a role. However, rather than transforming organisations, the application of digital technologies can reinforce pre-existing patterns and divisions (Fountain, 2009). Studies of civil servants show that many are sceptical about the effects of technologies on their ways of working although attitudes vary according to the task, the background of the civil servant and other factors (Baldwin et al., 2011, Christensen and Lægreid, 2010).

The persistence of the myth of transformation appears more deeply rooted in e-government than in e-democracy. In part this might be because there are different agendas for developing e-government and e-democratic initiatives (Parvez and Ahmed, 2007: 620). The weight of government attention and resources has been towards technologies that can save money, make services more efficient or improve back office functions, and the imperative for transformation here is stronger. This argument however, ignores the links and fluidity between managerial and democratic understandings and practice. In e-government and e-democracy there is a degree of convergence in the technologies used, the opportunities created for citizen engagement and the assumptions and beliefs of policy actors about e-participation (Chadwick, 2003: 453, Prachett, 2007: 4). Ring-fencing the concept of e-government as an entirely separate activity potentially misses some crucial dimensions of what constitutes e-democracy in practice.

2.5.1 Social construction of technology

In response to technological determinism, a range of academic traditions grouped together under the label Science and Technology Studies (STS) examines the interplay between social and technical processes in innovation and implementation. As such it explores the relationship and interaction of organisational, political, economic and cultural factors with technology (Edge and Williams, 1996: 865). This approach shows that the generation and implementation of new technologies often involve choices between several technical options. A range of social factors affect the technical options selected and these then have knock on consequences, both for social change and further technical development. From this perspective, technology is a socio-technical product as progress is shaped by the social circumstances in which it takes place (Wajcman, 2002: 352).

A central approach within STS is the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) advanced by Pinch and Bijker (1984), which focuses attention on the role that groups of human actors play

in shaping technological systems. Such groups might include ICT experts, administrators, policy makers, software developers, users of the technology and so on. They interpret the technology in particular ways and the meanings attached to the technologies become embedded and affect future developments (Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1999: 114). Design and innovation are not fixed at the initial stage but evolve through implementation and use. Different groups of people involved with the technology have different understandings of it and through their use can radically alter its meanings and deployment. This analysis can be helpfully applied to the government's use of digital technologies in e-democracy. It provides insight into how particular political or administrative pressures and interactions of different groups of people at every stage of technological development involves a set of choices about the direction as well as the rate of innovation, the content of technological artefacts and practices and differential outcomes for various groups:

> The introduction of ICT in public administration is a social intervention in a policy network, which influences the position, interests, values and (information) domains of the actors involved.
>
> (Pollitt, 2011: 379)

The SCOT approach also discusses the concept of irreversibility, the extent to which choices made determine future paths of development. There is disagreement amongst SCOT theorists about the degree to which earlier choices can be reversed (Edge and Williams, 1996: 867) but it challenges previous models of linear development and simplistic ideas of invention, and it opens new routes for analysis. These involve asking who makes choices in e-democracy, what are the technical, economic, organisational, political, or cultural elements that influence them, and how do choices at certain points shape future developments?

> A fresh perspective should allow e-democracy implications to be assessed within the institutional context that surrounds them, the agendas and purposes that underpin their development, the institutional structures and arrangements surrounding their design and use, as well as the ongoing shaping and use of e-democracy facilities by human actors.
>
> (Parvez and Ahmed, 2007: 620).

Latour's comment that 'technology is society made durable' (Latour, 1990) suggests that while technical efficiency plays a part in the choice of one technology over another; design, interpretation and use of technologies are embedded in the contingencies of socio-technical circumstances and institutional interests.

2.5.2 Technological enactment in organisations

Work by Fountain on the effects of technologies in organisations contributes to the discussion on the social construction of technologies by emphasizing the role of institutional constraints, and the embeddedness of government actors in influencing the design, perceptions, and uses of web technologies in organisational environments. She observes that the same information system in different organisational contexts leads to different results. Indeed, the same system might produce beneficial effects in one setting and negative effects in a different setting. She uses the term *objective* technology to refer to artefacts such as the Internet, hardware, software and telecommunications. These can be described objectively in terms of their capacity and functionality but when put into practice, they become *enacted* by those who use them within organisations who add their interpretations selections, application and use of technologies in co-operation with others and in networks (Fountain, 2005). Therefore, to understand the effects of technologies we need to understand how they are mediated by the institutional and organisational contexts in which they are implemented.

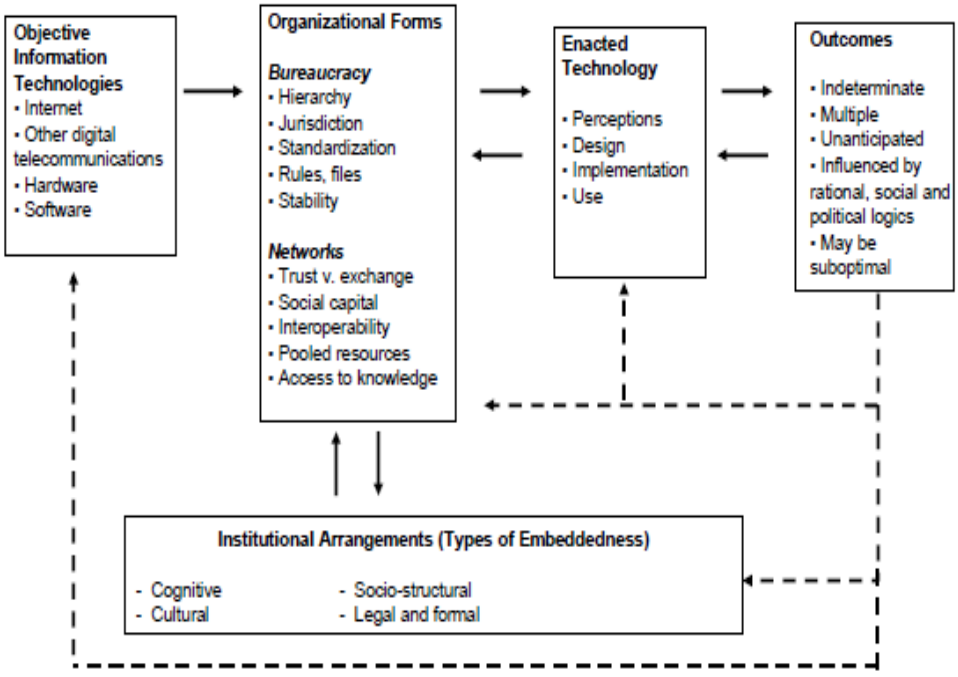

Figure 2: Technology Enactment Model (Fountain, 2005: 6)

Her model shows how new technology is incorporated into the existing institution and is changed by it. At the same time the technology may also exert a pressure for change on institutions. Fountain is writing primarily about the study of institutions in the context of the implementation of e-government, however she also suggests that there are unanswered research questions about the effects of technology on the quality of policy making and policy

implementation, (Fountain, 2009: 112). Prachett uses Fountain's analysis to suggest that e-democracy innovations are likely to emerge in complex environments and have multiple implications for democratic practice. While individual initiatives may have specific goals (such as enhancing the transparency of the policy process, increasing participation among particular groups, or building better opportunities for deliberation), their consequences are far from predictable (Prachett, 2007: 4).

An example of how user involvement is shaped by intention and design comes from a study of local government websites. The research by Wright and Street found that participative opportunities were structured through the website design. This was enhanced by the fact that many authorities used the same supplier. Councils appeared to focus on consultative options rather than discussion with 62 percent opting for consultation over 15 percent who used discussion forums at the time of the study (Wright and Street, 2007: 858). The predominance of one form of participation over another was not purely based on technical considerations. It was the product of technical, political and other choices, and of the contingencies of context. Another empirical study in Norway found the design of local government websites configured users into customers, clients or citizens. Such configurations highlight how actors shape technology to achieve certain objectives. Once configured, user pathways through the website were structured according to their configuration, directing them to different areas of the site, providing different links and making available different types of knowledge (Liste and Sorensen, 2015: 733). The design choices meant that certain choices were closed off and users were directed towards specified linkages of information and invitations to contribute.

2.5.3 Technical capital

Whereas the literature on organisational processes and structures focuses on the means by which technologies are shaped to reflect intentions, another aspect that has received relatively little attention in the literature on e-democracy is the acquisition and use of technical capital by policy actors in government, in terms of their knowledge, capacities or confidence. Yet possessing the appropriate resources allows actors to exert influence on the selection and use of digital tools to engage citizens. The term technical capital references Bourdieu's ideas on social and economic capital in the sense that capital acts as a set of useable resources and powers and operates as a process which allows for the storing and accumulation of advantage (Halford and Savage, 2010, Zhang, 2010). In the context of e-democracy, properties such as specialist knowledge, contacts or reputation can be converted into strategic means by which some actors can enhance their position over others.

The value of technical expertise (or conversely, the lack of it) is more fully explored within public administration approaches where the emphasis tends to be on how bureaucracies are delivering public services (Dunleavy, 2012, Fountain, 2009, Horrocks, 2009, Pollitt, 2011). There is widespread acknowledgement that understanding of digital tools in government is over-concentrated within digital and IT teams, with the consequence that many policy officials feel they are unable to sufficiently comprehend what uses of Web technologies could achieve (HM Government., 2012b). In relation to my thesis, there are questions about the civil servants who are charged with commissioning, designing or implementing e-democratic initiatives. Do they feel they have the right skills and resources? If not, who do they seek out to achieve their objectives? There are potential consequences in terms of impacts on initiatives, for example in design, management and evaluation.

The inability of government officials to understand and apply technologies to policy processes was highlighted by Tom Steinburg of MySociety in a blog post:

> You can no longer run a country properly if the elites don't understand technology in the same way they grasp economics or ideology or propaganda…What good governance and the good society look like is now inextricably linked to an understanding of the digital.
>
> (O'Reilly, 2013)

Horrocks (2009) examined how IT consultants have been able to occupy senior positions in government and by doing so, position themselves to shape future policy directions. Similarly, Halford et al. (2008) considered how the growing dependency on private sector contractors and ICT experts in Norway was re-shaping delivery of their healthcare policy. There has however, been little equivalent research on the role of experts in developing e-democracy policy. Questions about whether, or to what extent the policy actors involved in e-democracy seek to build strategic advantages from the technical capital they have acquired will be more fully explored in the empirical sections of the thesis.

Central to this discussion about the understanding and role of technology as it relates to the shaping of e-democracy is the perspective of STS which holds that technology does not exist as an external autonomous force, exerting an influence on society (Wajcman, 2002: 351). Nor are technologies invented at a single point of time, independently of other social circumstances. Rather technology is a socio-technical product emerging from social interactions among social groups and actors. Technology is not neutral but is part of socio-technical systems within which different actors have different interests and assign different

meanings to technologies. In relation to Web technologies, the focus is not only on the way in which different technologies are reshaped through struggles about interpretation but also on the dynamic relationship between discourse, practices, and power. In applying this to how e-democracy is enacted within government organisations, account needs to take of how adoption, configuration and use of technologies are additionally shaped by control of knowledge and expertise. Implicit in this approach are questions for the thesis to address about the relations between actors and how uses are forged between interactions of practices, meanings and social institutions.

2.6 Role of networks

Governments are moving away from the emphasis on elected representatives making policy choices that agencies then implement, to a broader proliferation of actors who become involved in the work of government. This wider perspective is not just about the use of tools but also about the interactions and practices of a wider group of actors in determining the shape of policy, its implementation and execution. The dynamics generated by these inter and intra-government structures, networks and hierarchies are characterised by conflict, collaboration or dependencies. The role of governance networks in the public sector has attracted considerable academic attention from those who are concerned with organisational arrangements; how actors come together to address issues, solve problems, and provide services (Provan and Lemaire, 2012).

The literature on network governance is relevant to the thesis because of the claims made that network governance offers greater democratic opportunities and the capacity to find more innovative responses to difficult problems. Fischer argues 'network governance involves intermediary spaces that readjust the boundaries between the state and its citizenry, establishing new places in which the participants from both can engage with each other' (Fischer, 2006: 19). Government acts as a facilitator, negotiator, and collaborator, working in partnership with private, public, and non-profit sectors. Networks and the institutional environment become sources of innovation (Coule and Patmore, 2013: 982).

Hupe and Hill (2007) argue that the shift from government to governance is of key importance in understanding the concept of the street-level bureaucrat. Lipsky (1993) developed the idea of street-level bureaucracy to describe workers who have a high degree of autonomy in dispensing benefits or the allocation of sanctions. He maintained that the individual solutions made by officials on the front-line in response to work pressures, add up effectively to form public policy from the bottom up. The multi-dimensional nature of

governance means that street-level actors are accountable to a complex institutional web which operates horizontally as well as vertically. This not only means that control from the top is harder to enforce but that street-level bureaucrats constantly have to weigh up how to act in the face of perhaps contradictory action imperatives (Hupe and Hill, 2007).

The concept of street-level bureaucracy may prove to be a useful way to understand the role of policy actors. Some e-democracy projects allocate relatively junior staff to work on e-projects without much direction from senior staff (Wright, 2006a: 241). In such situations, it could be argued that the situation has some similar characteristics to those identified by Lipsky. The official interacts with individual citizens and is required to act with discretion and autonomy. A further application of the street-level bureaucracy analysis can be made with regard to practitioners who fulfil two crucial characteristics raised by Lipsky: relatively high degrees of discretion; and autonomy from organizational authority (Hupe and Hill, 2007: 280). Practitioners are commissioned by government to develop and implement e-democracy projects. A characteristic of street level bureaucrats is the strong relationships they develop with their peers in their networks, potentially shaping behaviours, sharing knowledge and offering opportunities for collaboration, all of which has implications for the ways in which e-democracy is evolving. The interactive and immediate nature of social media means they can respond quickly and directly, potentially shaping policy through the accretion of many small actions and decisions.

Castells suggests that because of their superior performing capacity, networks are gradually eliminating centred hierarchical forms of organisation through competition with hierarchies (Castells, 2000: 695). He posits that technological innovation and the convergence of computing and telecommunications evolves in a distinctly different way to the industrial age. This influences new forms of social organisation and social interaction along electronically based information networks. Features of networks include dynamism, interactivity, and connectivity. The idea that technology, specifically information and communication technology, is the most important cause of social change has been criticised however as embodying an underlying technological determinism.

The contribution of Actor Network Theory (ANT) is in the understanding that technology and society are not separate spheres, but are mutually constitutive. Networks link human beings and non-human entities (Wajcman, 2002: 354). The networks are dynamic and evolving; their stability is based on the interactions of the actors and so is always temporary and precarious. ANT is descriptive rather than foundational in explanatory terms (Law, 2007: 2) and is embedded in empirical practice. It is about doing rather than being. The concept of

street-level bureaucracy can be helpfully linked to ideas contained in ANT on the construction of technologies as a moving relational process achieved in daily social interactions and to concepts of technical capital as a means of shaping policy

Discussion about networks encompasses different concepts and approaches of value for my research question, in particular, about how policy actors enact e-democracy. It provides a rich field of resources for my thesis to draw upon. Network governance examines horizontally structured organisations rather than vertical ones, although as discussed earlier, networks in government must find ways to accommodate the persistence of bureaucracy. Other writers emphasise the technological dimension of networks through the capacity of Web technologies to connect ideas, people and organisations. For some, the effects are dramatic, a new society, a new social structure. (Castells, 2000: 695) The development of social and mobile media also suggests possibilities for new forms of democracy (Loader and Mercea, 2011). ANT brings in the view that technology and society are mutually constitutive and that outcomes emerge from interactions between actors.

2.7 Discussion and conclusions

This chapter began by considering the promise and potential of e-democracy to offer new opportunities for democratic participation using emerging technologies. The research concentrates on claims about the potentially transformative effects of technology as these are shaped by and have become embedded in normative accounts of democracy and its futures (Medaglia, 2012, Lutz et al., 2014, Rose and Sanford, 2007, Saebo et al., 2008, Coleman and Moss, 2012). The literature is far less extensive however, when it comes to exploring what makes up the reality of everyday enactment of e-democracy. Chadwick argues that what happens inside government organisations is powerful in determining outcomes but this has been largely neglected by scholars in researching the internet, governance and democracy (Chadwick, 2011: 21-23).

The literatures on democratic participation were also considered in the context of how e-democracy has been conceptualised and applied. While the scholarly literature concerning Web, governance and democracy has grown at remarkable rate, information from government insiders has been thin on the ground (Chadwick, 2011: 21). The exploration of the attitudes, shared meanings, resources, interactions, and capacities of those responsible for developing and implementing e-democratic initiatives have been neglected in previous studies.

The Web offers possibilities for new forms of democratising behaviours and innovations (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 12). Participation in societal democratic and consultative

processes, mediated by information and communication technologies, could be extended and transformed (Rose and Sanford, 2007: 910). The vision of e-democracy is attractive in it responds to an anxiety about perceived lack of democratic engagement with a belief in the opportunities provided by new technologies. However as empirical work on e-democratic initiatives developed, the evidence showed a more complex picture. E-democracy has not transformed the democratic landscape and much of the subsequent research has considered the reasons for the gap between initial aims and substantive change.

This chapter has shown that there are many descriptions and understandings of e-democracy but little agreement between writers on a definition, or on integration of theories and methods to take the research agenda forward. It is clear that there is no single agreed definition of e-democracy, and this is a point made by many of the contributors (Saebo et al., 2008, Lutz et al., 2014, Medaglia, 2012). The profusion of conceptualisations and definitions can be attributed in part to the emerging nature of the research agenda and the different academic perspectives involved. At the same time it is important to acknowledge that differences in definitions arise not only from different academic perspectives but because e-democracy is a contested concept. A range of actors seek to impose their interpretation of the way e-democracy is seen and understood.

Within political science, there is extensive research on citizen participation but there is little discussion on the benefits, opportunities or motivations for officials to develop e-democratic initiatives. We do not know if, in this context, officials resist greater citizen participation or if they share political anxiety about lack of engagement, whether there are distinctions between different groups of officials or how conflicts and tensions are resolved within government. Most existing research in this area has looked at e-democracy in the local context. We know little about the perceptions of policy actors on the relative value and purpose of undertaking e-democracy initiatives at national or local levels, and whether their motivations are affected by the nature of policy or the stage of policy formation. Using policy discourse analysis as a tool, the thesis will examine more deeply the conditions that create persuasive discourses and map how they are reproduced or contested.

Much existing research into citizen participation focuses on participation as a separate process from the technologies considered or used and this casts technology implicitly as an independent entity rather than exploring what participation becomes when combined with certain forms and uses of technologies in specific contexts. The STS perspective addresses the issue of technology being defined as an objective entity with independent causal powers and considers the relationship between society and technology. By applying the ideas about the

importance of human interaction in shaping technology to the implementation of e-democracy, new questions emerge. The core of these questions is grounded in understanding what influences practices: who are the actors, how do they operate and relate to each other, and what are the effects of their actions?

In conclusion, this thesis seeks to consider to what extent, the attitudes, shared meanings, interactions and resources of policy actors shape the imagining and realisation of e-democracy. As previously discussed, the question of what is e-democracy does not have one answer in the literature, it has many. The concept means different things to different people. Therefore it is all the more important in seeking answers to my research question that I ask what it means to policy actors. To this end, I have studied literatures that explore understandings of democratic participation, different constructions of what a citizen is and the purpose and value of participation, on and offline. Work on the social construction of technology and how it becomes enacted in organisational situations is relevant in examining the motivations and activities of policy actors. I also considered research that discusses how the organisational environment in which e-democracy is situated, shapes and channels understandings and practices.

Missing from existing research on e-democracy to date is more in-depth empirical investigation into the work of policy actors. Mapping their relationships with each other, with politicians and with external actors enables the 'black box' of government to be opened in ways that have so far not been undertaken. Exploring the motivations, conceptualisations and discourses that legitimise some forms of knowledge and structure actions extends insights both into the historical development of e-democracy and consideration of how new forms of e-democracy are evolving. Existing research has frequently proceeded along separate paths of enquiry into different facets of e-democracy. There are few studies that investigate the co-constructive and mutually shaping interactions between actors, technologies and organisations in the field of e-democracy. Accordingly my approach in the thesis is to study the interactions in the context of the environment in which they are situated; to understand e-democracy as an element in the ecology of larger social and technical processes. The means by which I have sought to find answers to these questions are discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: The methodological approach and research design

3.1 Defining the field

This chapter discusses how the field of research was defined from the initial research goals with which I embarked upon the thesis. The research aims led to the development of specific research questions which delineated my research goals into more specific areas of inquiry and exploration. My research originated from a mixture of interests including improving public participation in politics, how organisations function and the implications of new technologies on political systems. This thesis seeks to investigate how policy actors develop and implement e-democracy policy. It examines the space between rhetorical intentions and outcomes. In examining these issues, the thesis considers the institutional narratives that are deployed around democratic participation and in particular how these coalesce around digital innovations in organisational contexts.

I began my research with some initial assumptions: one assumption was that that civil servants have a key role in shaping e-democracy, and another was that the democratic process is failing or in need of repair. This implies that digital technologies could help resolve the situation and further that e-democracy is a coherent and graspable concept. The previous chapter identified that much of the current research has failed to examine the role of civil servants in conceptualising, developing and implementing e-democracy. Subsequent questions were developed to define areas of investigations. First, what are the understandings that civil servants hold and transmit about democratic participation; how do they talk about it with each other? Do all policy actors hold similar ideas and if not, how are the differences expressed and what influence do they have on practices? Secondly, how significant are policy discourses in structuring understandings of e-democracy? To what extent do discourses influence behaviours and practices? Thirdly how are digital technologies understood and enacted in institutional settings? What are the limitations of organisational capacity in managing ICT and to what degree do the skills and knowledge of officials affect selection and design? Technological developments and social interactions combine and create many forms of online participation which can result in both expected and unexpected outcomes. This leads to a further area of enquiry. Socio-technical interactions are situated within an organisational context, made up of formal structures, rules and processes, as well as discourses and

narratives. How do different government organisations influence the practices and behaviours of officials in developing e-democracy policy and initiatives? In addition, I considered the actors who define and shape e-democracy. Since, not all civil servants are regularly involved in e-democracy or have the technological skills to implement projects, who do they contact to help them? What is the influence of these other actors on how e-democracy projects are designed and run and how is the relationship defined and negotiated?

These questions guided and focused my inquiry and as the thesis progressed, and as new information or ways of thinking emerged, they have been continuously evaluated for their links and coherence with the applied methodology. Mason argues that research strategies are structured around intellectual puzzles to which the research should attempt to produce an explanation or an argument (Mason, 2002: 18) and that the choice of strategy influences the methodology. She suggests there are four common categories of puzzle; developmental, mechanical; comparative and causal/predictive. Each contains their own sets of ontological and epistemological assumptions although puzzles can be combinations or variations of the above.

My research issue has developmental aspects in that I seek to explain how digital democratic innovations developed within government, and there is also a mechanical aspect because I am focusing on the way organisational and political processes and social phenomena are constituted, how they work. Mason's point is that by thinking through how a research topic is defined, the researcher is making theoretical and philosophical choices based on a view or theory about social reality. These are underpinned by the methodological approach and manifested in the methods of collection and analysis of data. My research topic expresses the view that the social world is constructed and interpreted rather than an external objective reality which can be measured or verified. The methods that I selected were those that enabled me to explore complexity, situation and context. This chapter goes on to discuss the methods and their relationship to the research questions. I consider the ethical implications of the research and I show how these were identified and addressed. Finally, I examine some of the problems and issues of access to people and documentation and reflect on my own status as a researcher and a civil servant.

3.1.1 Knowledge in social research

The distinctions made between qualitative and quantitative research approaches rests on differing ontological and epistemological positions. These are complicated philosophical questions to which some researchers give considerable attention. My approach is more

pragmatic but I recognise that some reflection is necessary as the basis of understanding why I make certain choices over others.

A more qualitative methodological design aims to interpret events by discovering the meanings that actors attribute to behaviour and the external world. The positivist tradition by contrast, seeks causal explanations based on a cause/effect relationship between variables (della Porta and Keating, 2008: 26). At root, they represent radically different principles and rules by which social phenomena can be known and how knowledge is demonstrated (Mason, 2002: 16) although in practice, social science research is more complex and different approaches are mixed in various ways. There are a range of positions held within both qualitative and quantitative research traditions (Silverman, 2005: 14) and methodological choices are not always exclusive:

> Thus, a distinction between explaining how something operates (explanation) and why it operates in the manner that it does (interpretation) may be a more effective way to distinguish quantitative from qualitative analytic processes involved in any particular study.
>
> (Thorne, 2000: 68)

There is ongoing discussion in social science about how research should be evaluated and what it is that we are evaluating. How can research be judged to have been effectively undertaken? Critics of qualitative methods have focused on whether findings are genuinely based on analytical investigation of all the data rather than depending on subjectively selected examples. Silverman (2005: 211)called this the problem of anecdotalism. One response to this is to note that *all* research data analysis is in practice undertaken in a qualitative manner. Data analysis is an interpretative act, choices are made at the collection and analysis stage about which data is selected or discarded and the reasoning behind inferences drawn from the data are based on our interpretations (Silverman, 2005: 211).

To answer criticisms about qualitative methods Yardley (2000) proposed four criteria by which research can be judged: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, impact and importance .

- **Sensitivity to context**: concerns the researchers understanding of the socio-cultural context and in their ability to represent the respondents' perspectives, as well as an awareness of previous literature in the research area.
- **Commitment and rigour**: commitment is demonstrated through the researcher's immersion in the data and their engagement with the topic, while rigour refers to the

comprehensiveness of the data collection and analysis to refute criticisms of subjectivity.

- **Transparency and coherence**: visibility and accessibility of research methods so that external sources can follow the process even if it is not possible to replicate. Also to show how the underlying theory and methods fit together in a reasoned manner.
- **Impact and importance:** the value of the research draws upon the contribution it makes to knowledge, either theoretical or practical. The potential for the research to serve some social purpose or have some social effects (Yardley, 2000: 223)

These principles are flexible and open to interpretation and they are useful guidelines to consider against which the research can be assessed. Methods are no more than ways of acquiring data (della Porta and Keating, 2008: 28) but they need to fit with the research question in terms of interest, goals, objectives and other choices already made in the study My methodological choices were made at relatively early stages of the research, but the conceptualisation and conduct of qualitative research is a circular, recursive and reflective process (Chenail, 2011: 1724, Mason, 2002: 32) meaning that my choices were continuously being checked and reconsidered to ensure they remained consistent to my research aims and worked together coherently.

3.2 Research strategy

Having defined the field of research for investigation, the next step was to design a research strategy that would operate as a framework within which data is collected and analysed in order to provide answers to my research questions. I chose a more qualitative research design because I am concerned with how the social world of civil servants is constituted, understood and experienced and how that explains their actions and behaviours in relation to e-democracy. I selected methods to generate data that were rich, nuanced and sensitive to the social context in which it was produced. As established in the literature review there is a lack of qualitative research in the field of e-democracy which examines the role of policy actors, the assumptions and values they hold, the choices they make, and the constraints and pressures upon them in the context of government online democratic innovations in the UK.

The thesis seeks to gain insight into the complex interplay of relationships, interactions, decisions and networks (Chadwick, 2011: 23). To this end, the methodology was orientated towards listening to the stories and experiences of those involved in shaping e-democracy. I wanted to hear about the problems they encountered and the opportunities they engaged with as well as their beliefs and intentions. By listening, questioning and observing, I attempted to

understand the connections between government discourses, and actions, the links between linguistic and material practices and how these are contingent upon or mediated by the environment in which they operate. The process of constructing knowledge from the data is the most complex and mysterious of all of the phases of a qualitative project (Thorne, 2000: 68). In undertaking the fieldwork and interviews the significance of the contextual experience, the 'being-there-ness' of the researcher, for the process of data analysis is highlighted (James, 2013: 565). A great value of 'being there' is in generating ideas or links that would not have been made otherwise.

In developing the methodology, a further consideration was the question 'Where was I in this?' Through engagement with the data, I sought to investigate and make sense of the mass of socio-technical phenomena, relationships and processes involved. To what extent were my own beliefs and assumptions shaping the framework of the research? Methods of data analysis are not simply neutral techniques, they carry the epistemological, ontological and theoretical assumptions of the researchers who develop them (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). The researcher is not an impartial collector of information but is part of the picture and as such implicated in the interpretation of data (Mason, 2002: 52). The tacit knowledge, perspective and understandings that the researcher brings to the encounter cannot be discounted and indeed are part of the creative process of analysis and interpretation. Some further reflections on my positionality as a researcher for this project are expressed later in the chapter when I discuss the experience of interviewing and how I gained access to respondents.

3.2.1 Paths not taken

I have conceptualised the research issue as one that seeks to understand the social world that policy actors inhabit and to see it through their eyes. The methods of data generation were selected as part of that research strategy but there were other potential approaches that I could have followed. One of these was the use of specific case studies of online participation. Reviews of e-democracy research indicate that the case study approach is one of the most used methodological approaches (Medaglia, 2012: 354):

> Case studies can be defined as one case (or a small number of cases) that are studied in detail using whatever methods seem appropriate…the general objective is to develop as full an understanding of that case as possible.
>
> (Silverman, 2005: 126)

Support for the case study approach, argues that the use of multiple data-collection methods provides a rich picture of single units of analysis. It is also claimed that the approach is an

effective strategy to evaluate phenomena and assist with the development of theories (McGloin, 2008). There have been a number of studies of e-democracy that have focused on single or small groups of cases of e-democratic innovation (Coleman and Blumler, 2011, Chadwick, 2011, Wright, 2006b, Prachett, 2007). The methodological literature identifies some concerns about definition, status and practice with regard to the use of case studies (Diefenbach, 2009, Jones and Lyons, 2004, Levy, 2008, Tight, 2010). Key criticisms focus on their potential for being merely descriptive and subjective.

My approach to the research is based on investigating what constitutes the social world of policy actors concerned with e-democracy. As a result, the case study approach for a specific bounded example was less applicable. In part this is because e-democracy is not a single concept, its meaning is contested and approaches to it are diverse and fragmentary. Focusing on one or two cases of participatory initiatives and using them as examples that could be applied to others would be misleading. For example a focus on discussion forums could suggest that these are the norm rather than occasional and often experimental projects. More fundamentally, my approach is 'multi-dimensional, contingent, relationally implicated and entwined' (Mason, 2011: 78) and as such there is an emphasis on how conceptualisations of e-democracy are shaped even before work is commissioned on specific projects, the narratives produced by actors, their relationships and interactions with technologies that lead to particular forms of practice.

Another initial methodological choice was to map government departments' e-democracy initiatives over time through their websites. The purpose was to examine the differences between the government departments, for example whether some departments undertook more e-democratic projects than others or whether particular types of e-democratic initiatives, such as discussion forums gained or lost popularity over a stated period of time. This method was not pursued to a conclusion for two reasons. The first was that I realised through the interviews and participant observation data that e-democracy has no single or collective agreed meaning across government, even amongst those who are most involved in shaping it. This is unsurprising given that the literature research showed that academic debate has also failed to come to an agreed definition of what e-democracy is or involves (Rose and Sanford, 2007: 910, Medaglia, 2012: 346). However, it meant that I could not be certain that I was accurately capturing information on the government websites about e-democratic projects even though I used several keywords in my searches. My concern was that the picture presented from the data I collected through the websites would be partial and potentially misleading about the level and nature of e-democratic activity in departments.

The second obstacle to following this methodological strategy was that in 2011 the government gradually moved all the departmental information onto a single site, gov.uk. Initially this appeared to be helpful since the architecture of the departmental websites varied considerably and navigation of the different sites had been problematic. However, further investigation of gov.uk revealed that their structuring of information on the website meant that some e-democratic projects were very hard to find (although others were easier) and comparability of projects over time was not possible. Although it meant that an initial methodological choice could not be realised, pursuing this path yielded two significant and very useful insights for my research. First, it made manifest the fragility inherent in mapping information on specific websites. Ackerson (2011) notes that the Web's distinct mixture of the permanent and the ephemeral creates distinct challenges for researchers because unlike prior media forms Web artefacts are regularly overwritten as new versions replace what came before (Ankerson, 2011: 387). Although much of the information that existed on previous government websites is archived, the information is altered in its archived form either through omissions or broken links and missing images. Secondly, it highlighted the role of gov.uk in privileging some information over others and configuring roles for users. Studies have shown democratic possibilities opened up or closed off by websites, are not a product of the technology as such, but in how they are constructed, and how they are designed (Wright and Street, 2007: 850). The design of gov.uk is based on an understanding of the user as someone who wants access to information and services rather than someone who wants to survey government department's choices in e-democracy.

I have spent some time exploring options that were not finally incorporated into the research design because they were relevant to the wider process of reflecting on the research design in which the eventual methods selected were appropriate to the questions being addressed. The process of pursuing but eventually discarding some methods was creative, because it produced tensions that needed to be resolved and ultimately enabled a closer alignment of methods with the interest, goals, and objectives of the research.

3.2.2 The research design

My research design is comprised of several linked methods undertaken concurrently. I pursued documentary analysis of official policy and guidance papers focusing on e-democracy and e-government and I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with civil servants who worked on aspects of e-democracy and others closely associated with them. At the same time I became a participant-observer of a group of policy actors, who meet monthly to discuss digital issues and government. Each of these methods was designed to develop my capacity to

explain and interpret the complex social environments inhabited by the policy actors, gaining insight into their patterns of values, behaviours, and relationships, as well as studying the unfolding history of e-democracy as it emerges from memories, discussions, reflections and rhetoric.

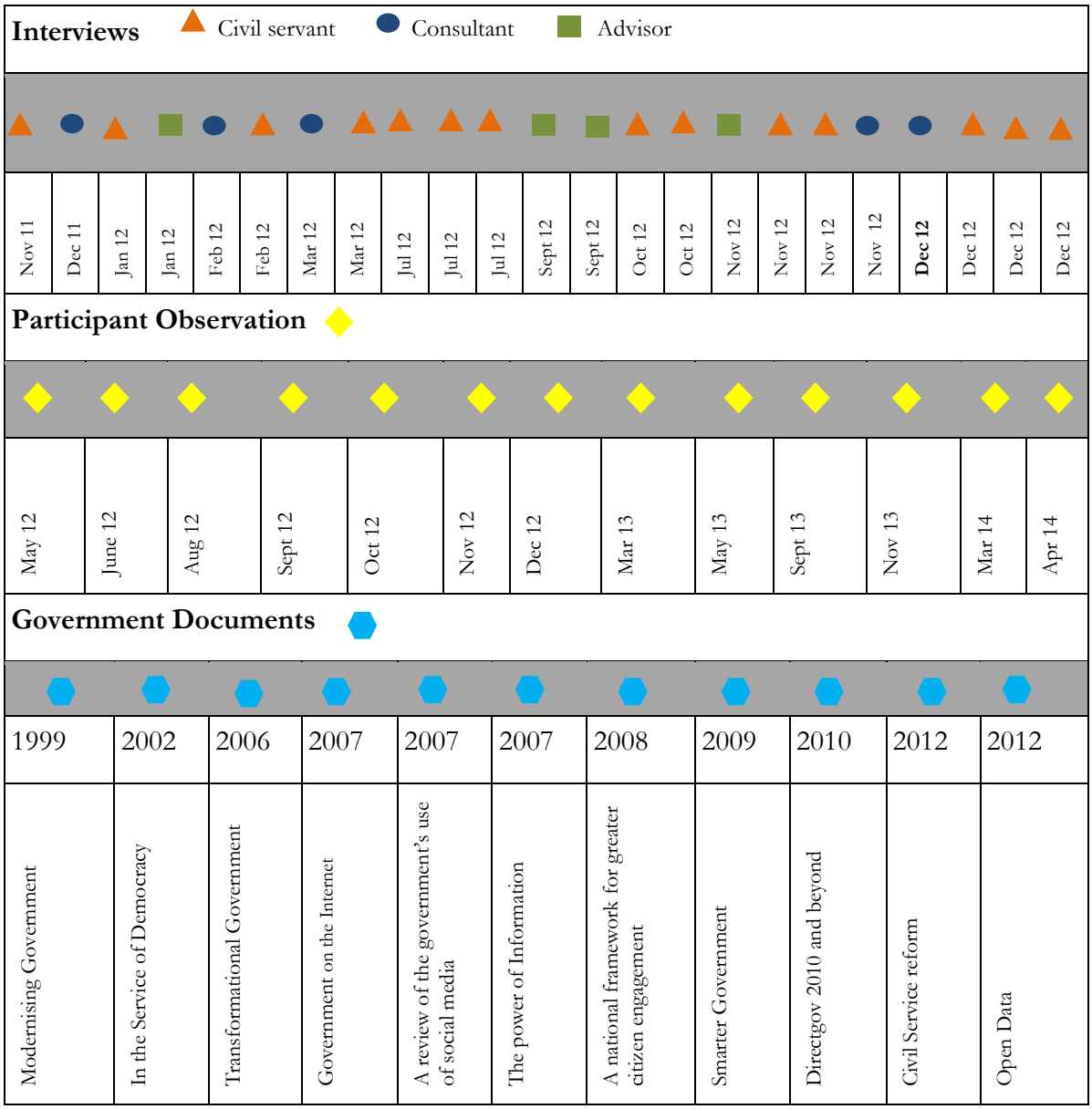

Table 1: Data Collection 2011-2014

3.3 The methods selected

In this section, the choices made about methods, the data sources, and what kind of data the methods will yield are examined in more detail. The previous section examined the reasoning behind my methodological strategy and research questions. The methods are the means by which the data is selected to analyse in relation to the research questions. In addition to the fit

with the methodology, the choice of methods was influenced by their connections with each other, as well as pragmatic choices on access and availability of data.

The purpose in examining official documentation was to study documents in their social setting; that is to consider how they are manufactured and consumed as well as their content. It also enabled comparison of data from the government documents with what was being generated through the interviews and participant observation. To more fully understand the contested and contingent nature of e-democracy, I needed to talk to civil servants and to other actors such as government commissioned advisors and contractors who design or build projects for civil servants. My reasoning was that the sample group would provide multiple perspectives on how digital democratic projects developed and progressed. When I embarked upon the interviewing process, I was informed by respondents about a group who met monthly to discuss digital technologies in government and I asked if I could observe the group so that I could study the cultural and social setting in which they operated. The link between the three types of methods used to generate data for the thesis is an emphasis on the situational and interactional and an examination of how issues are perceived rather than a comparison of differences or similarities.

3.3.1 Government documents as sources of data

Government policy papers and guidance for civil servants relating to the development and use of digital technologies and participation were selected in order to consider how the authors positioned themselves, what was prioritised or problematised and the recommendations for action. The date range of the documents was set from 1996 to 2013. 1996 was the first government document focusing on the political implications of the emergent Web technologies. The final document selected considered the impacts of social media in government/citizen interactions. The timescale covered three Governments administrations showing how different administrations defined and interpreted e-democracy, what actions they proposed and the continuities and changes over time.

The criteria for selecting the documents were that they had to be authored by HM Government, or a government department, or a government agency such as the National Audit Office, or were government commissioned reports. Additionally, the documents needed to be publicly accessible either as printed documents or electronically. The documents selected included papers on e-democracy and e-government and wider digital issues in government. Selecting papers looking solely at e-democracy was impractical for a number of reasons. There are many connections and links between the implementation of e-government and

e-democracy policies and the government's approach to them has become increasingly entwined. For example in Gordon Brown's foreword to the 2009 White Paper, *Putting the Frontline First, Smarter Government:*

> This diffusion of power is the next stage of public service reform. We will embrace new technology to better inform the public; give citizens new rights to information; create a new dialogue between people and public service professionals; and reduce bureaucratic burdens. Public services will improve as they become more personal and more cost-effective, and at the same time they will strengthen democratic deliberation and control in local communities.
>
> (HM Government., 2009: 8)

The means by which civil servants developed, or applied digital technologies to improve e-government services are also used in democratic participation initiatives; for example feedback mechanisms on quality of services have been used as a means of seeking comments on development of policies. However while acknowledging the connections between e-government and e-democracy it is important to note that successive governments have given most of their attention and resources to using digital technologies to deliver public services more cheaply and efficiently. Much less of their concern has been with democratic empowerment and this is clearly reflected in government literature.

There were 32 government documents that met my selection criteria covering the period of 1996 to 2013 (Appendix C). From this list 11 key documents were selected for their particular significance in signposting policy directions and discursive constructions Documentary analysis provides a counterpoint to the other methods of interviewing and participant observation by examining the official rhetoric on e-democracy and comparing it to the opinions and perceptions of the respondents. It has been defined as an 'unobtrusive' mode of research in that it is based on already existing documentation (Ball, 2011). The data are usually prepared prior to the research and for other purposes, so the data collection process does not influence them: they are 'non-reactive' unlike some other sorts of documents, for example, diaries kept specifically for the purpose of research, where the knowledge of their research purpose may influence what is written (Shaw et al., 2006).

I used discourse analysis as a tool to examine government thinking over time, focusing on the rhetorical themes such as 'modernisation', 'democratisation', 'transparency' and 'openness'

found within the documents. I sought to understand how the linked ideas, concepts and categorisations provided material for specifying what is legitimate, who has authority and what types of actions were expected to follow. Inside government as well as externally, actors hold a variety of positions, and have different interests. Within a discourse what is considered authoritative and legitimate changes over time as contradictions emerge, challenges are made and new circumstances evolve. The discursive struggles are manifested both in the documents and in how the documents are used by actors.

The role of documents is determined not only by looking at each unit but in terms of their intertextuality, that is how they are understood by their readers in context with, and in response to other documentation, conversation, ideas and practices (Grant et al., 2004: 12). Whereas documentary analysis often focuses on the content, it is also instructive for my research to consider the documents as objects and actors in a wider web of activity. By asking how the documentation examined came to assume the form it did, questions can be asked about how the document functions rather than simply what it says (Prior, 2008b). Atkinson and Coffey (2004) argue that documents can be viewed as a distinct level of 'reality' in their own right. They can be examined as texts that were written with particular purposes in mind, and analysed in terms of who wrote them, the audience they were produced for, and how they connect to other materials. The sample documents are examined for how they mediate and structure interaction between actors, and how they can be recruited into alliances of interests. In this sense the documents do not stand alone but build on previous documents and practices which provide continuity, authority and options for future actions.

3.3.2 Interviews

There are fruitful links to be explored between the documentary analysis and the interviews. Government documents are collective endeavours and many of the respondents involved in my research had contributed to writing or researching the documents studied. These documents were inextricably embedded in the construction of reality for these actors. The interviews allowed insights into how the respondents interpreted and used the documents to position themselves, to provide authority and to establish meanings.

The format of semi-structured interviews was selected to provide the opportunity for respondents to express their thoughts, views and concerns in a relatively informal and flexible manner rather than a question and answer format. Qualitative interviews are more about the construction or reconstruction of knowledge than about excavation of facts (Mason, 2002: 63). As such, interviews aimed to ascertain how respondents understood and navigated their

world. There was some element of comparability between the interviews as I used a similar interview guide throughout (Appendix A) but the advantage of not structuring the questions too closely was that often new data emerged, involving areas that I would not have thought to ask about.

I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with civil servants, advisers to the government on e-democracy and contractors/designers commissioned to develop projects (See Table 1). Each interview lasted approximately an hour and all except one were audio-recorded (on one occasion the audio recorder failed to work). They were subsequently transcribed and coded using NVivo software. In the data analysis section later in this chapter, there is a further discussion on the process of coding data and on the experience of using computer aided analysis.

Sampling and Saturation

My selection of people to interview was based on a generic purposive sampling strategy, in which the criteria employed were based on the research questions. I established the range of people I wanted to interview, identified appropriate individuals and then sampled from those identified (Bryman, 2012). The civil service respondents came from a number of different departments within government, and from different teams and levels of seniority. By selecting across departments and levels of hierarchy, I wanted to see if there were variations in their responses that could be attributed to organisational culture or positions within the organisation. Subsequent to the purposive sampling strategy, other respondents were found using a snowballing technique in which the initially sampled respondents proposed other respondents who were relevant to the research. The advantage of using this technique was that it revealed the connectedness of individuals and the networks that were not otherwise immediately visible. Sample size in qualitative interview is the subject of discussion and disagreement amongst researchers (Mason, 2010) although in general the guiding principle is that size is guided by when saturation is reached. The concept of saturation is further hotly debated and may relate to theoretical saturation, data saturation or informational redundancy (Bryman, 2012) but it seems relevant also to consider saturation of respondents. I continued interviewing until the recommendations of respondents for interview subjects were people who had previously been recommended to me. I was not able to interview everyone who was recommended to me for reasons of time or convenience (theirs) or in some case they did not wish to be interviewed. For most of those I was unable to interview however, I had some phone or email contact to establish their links and involvement.

Elite interviewing

Literature on interviewing often stresses that interviewing is not a neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers. It is a contextually bound and mutually created story between two or more people (Fontana and Frey, 1994). Some regard the interviewer-interviewee relationship as skewed in favour of the interviewer because the interviewer asks the questions and assesses the information. However in the context of my interview sample, many of those I interviewed were senior and influential people. Research into interviewing elites suggests there may be problems of access, the challenge of interviewees controlling the agenda, or the deferential attitude of interviewers to their subjects or potentially even the problem of deception (Richards, 1996).

Within the interview environment, power is transactional and dynamic rather than static. Power shifts back and forth with regards to the interviewer and the interviewee. Both the interviewer and the interviewee may use their respective powers to negotiate the level of information provided for the research. The interviewer sets up the framework and analyses the information provided while the interviewee owns the knowledge and experience which they may choose to withhold or reveal (Anyan, 2013). The shifting power dynamics were part of the complexities of the social interaction that I needed to negotiate. Although in elite interviewing, power may seem to slanted toward the respondent, my approach was that knowledge is contextual, situational and interactional (Mason, 2002: 64) so whatever happens within the interview will generate relevant data. Thus tussles over time available or choosing which questions to answer, for example, are not barriers to acquiring knowledge but insights that can be analysed as part of the research. The importance was in maintaining awareness of what was happening rather than trying to ignore or resolve it.

3.3.3 Investigating the role of networks

When developing the initial sampling strategy, I divided the interview respondents into three groups. The first were government commissioned advisors on government policy; secondly, I looked for implementers of projects, who were mostly civil servants; and the third group consisted of commissioned contractors or consultants who designed and built the projects. My expectation was that the three groups would be quite separate in their approaches and experiences. Consequently, I intended to make comparisons between the three groups to generate a range of insights into the experience of working with e-democracy that I would not be able to get from a single group.

Once interviewing was underway, those interviewed recommended other individuals. Some were civil servants in Whitehall departments or from the Government Digital Service which is part of Cabinet Office. Others were external to the civil service but worked closely with civil servants to advise, either at the government level on advisory boards for example, or to work on specific participatory initiatives. Out of the fieldwork, a definable coalition of actors working in e-democracy has emerged. There was considerable movement and fluidity between the groups. Advisors sometimes also acted as designers or builders of projects. Consultants were rarely concerned only with software or IT and implementers were often also advisors and/or designers. Many of the respondents had either previously worked in the civil service and at the time of interview, had left and taken on other roles within the voluntary or private sector; others were appointed as civil servants because of their previous roles outside the civil service.

This raised new questions for me about my approach in analysing the interview data. Rather than attempting to compare different groups against each other to consider the separations between them, I moved instead to looking at the connections between actors and examining the role networks played in shaping e-democracy and digital issues more widely in government. Actor Network Theory (ANT) is an approach which examines the associations between actors and the outcomes produced by following the process of their interactions (Tinati, 2013: 31). ANT understands the network as dynamic and evolving; its stability is based on the interactions of the actors and is always temporary and precarious. ANT is descriptive rather than foundational in explanatory terms (Law, 2007: 2) and is embedded in empirical practice. Research on the impact of the technical on social relations and the emphasis on the user as a co-constructor of technologies considers the complexity of information technology as stable and unstable practices by transgressing the dividing lines between humans and non-humans.

In this thesis, I draw upon ANT as a methodological tool to consider how actors connected to e-democracy come together in different spaces and configurations enabling study of the individual elements that make or shape systems, the fluidity of relationships and the outcomes from the associations. Consider all the elements that contribute to the network of e-democracy: there are human actors, civil servants, practitioners, campaigners, software developers, citizens and non-human elements: government departments, Government Digital Service, gov.uk, e-democracy software, Twitter, IT infrastructure. The relations between them fluctuates generating different practices and discourses at different times. The non-human actors, for example gov.uk shapes what happens just as much as the human actors but the

outcomes can only be studied by following the interactions through empirical investigation. Using the principles of ANT was also helpful in the participant observation process.

3.3.4 Participant Observation

In conjunction with interviewing, I undertook participant observation of a regular meeting of predominantly civil servants involved or interested in digital work in government. 'Teacamp' is described on its website as 'an informal gathering for digital people who work in and around government and also outside of government' (www.tea.gov.camp). The monthly 'Teacamp' meeting is part of a range of camp meetings, there is an annual 'Govcamp' and smaller gatherings focusing on project work or based outside London. The terminology of 'camp' and 'unconference' is used by digital enthusiasts to denote participation-driven meetings.

Their description of themselves is deliberately general because they aim to draw in a wide range of civil servants from both policy and communication specialisms, and non-government employees. Most, but not all of the attending civil servants, are digital specialists in government departments. A number of external organisations and individuals also attend, who regularly work with government on digital projects.

I selected 'Teacamp' because of the participants' interest in and involvement with digital technologies in government. I wanted to listen to their opinions and discussions about uses of digital technologies, particularly with regard to democratic participation and to observe behaviours within the group. Many of those attending are influential in shaping design and application of technologies across government because of their specialist expertise or their occupational role. I wanted to observe how networks and relationships between members of the group were manifested, for example in behaviours observed, the discourses they use, and how knowledge is exchanged. Whereas interviews provide knowledge that is articulable, recountable and constructable (Mason, 2002: 85), participant observation reveals naturally occurring data that is not reliant on the researcher's interventions. It offers an opportunity to observe interactions and listen to informal conversations. Within this context, the ANT perspective provides a rich insight into how actors come together, their interactions with the technologies, and how they seek to enrol other actors into the network in order to produce outcomes.

There is some discussion in research literature about distinctions between the terms, 'ethnography' and 'participant observation'. Bryman suggests that increasingly the preferred term by researchers is 'ethnography' perhaps because participant-observation implies more emphasis on observation (Bryman, 2012: 430). Others have suggested that rather than

participant 'observation', 'engaged listening' is at the heart the activity (Paechter, 2013: 4). There is also a suggestion that ethnography implies a more prolonged immersion into the culture of the group being studied whereas participation observation may be more intermittent (Bryman, 2012, Paechter, 2013). My preference in this thesis is to describe the activity as 'participant observation' in part because it was intermittent rather than continuous but also because it has a more explanatory quality.

I attended 13 meetings of 'Teacamp' over a period of about 18 months. On average about 20-30 people attend each meeting although some meetings had many more participants. There is a core of about 20 people who go to most of the meetings and the remainder are either occasional attendees or attending for the first time. The format of the meetings is a mixture of informal chat, followed by a speaker then questions and discussions and a return to informal gatherings. The meetings are held in central London on the first Thursday of the month, in a café which is open to the public. The public location and open nature of the meetings meant I did not have any problems of access in terms of becoming part of the group. In this respect, the discussion below about insider access is pertinent; my employment status as a civil servant provided a context for my research that perhaps some members found reassuring. During the meetings I took brief notes although I did not want to make people feel self-conscious. Usually on the train home after the meeting I would write up fuller notes based on my observations.

The ethics of covert or overt participation observation are widely discussed in the literature and in some circumstances the identity of the researcher may need to be hidden (Bryman, 2012: 441-5) although this was not relevant to my situation. I discuss the ethical implications of my research more broadly below. From the outset I was open about my role and spoke initially to the organiser of the group to ask if she was willing to let me attend in my research capacity. The organiser of the group acted as my key informant in terms of introducing me to people, publicising my research and recommending people to interview. The role of key informant is one that is discussed in the literature (Bryman, 2012: 439) and is recognised as helpful in gaining the trust of the group but also carries with it the risk that the researcher could begin to see the social reality through the eyes of the key informant.

The activities of participant observation and interviewing were carried out concurrently. Members of the group and the interview respondents overlapped to some degree enabling me to compare and contextualise what I observed or heard within the group environment with what the respondents spoke about in the interview setting and the ideas and discourses that I found within government documents. This combination of methods generated rich and

nuanced data enabling a deeper analysis into the complexities and connectedness of respondents' social environments. By using these different but related approaches I was able to gain a more rounded, multi-dimensional understanding of the issues at stake in the research.

3.4 Ethics

An integral part of the research project, was the consideration of the ethical implications from an early stage so that it could be considered as part of the research strategy design (Appendix B). The ESRC's Framework for Research Ethics lays down six principles for ethical research. Although I not funded by the ESRC, I sought to ensure my research projects these principles:

- Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity, quality and transparency.
- Research staff and respondents must normally be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved.
- The confidentiality of information supplied by research respondents and the anonymity of respondents must be respected.
- Research respondents must take part voluntarily, free from any coercion.
- Harm to research respondents and researchers must be avoided in all instances.
- The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.

(Economic & Social Research Council., 2010)

3.4.1 Informed consent of respondents

To achieve informed consent from potential interviewees, I provided an information sheet in advance of the interview, explaining the purpose of the research project and my contact details. I was clear that I was undertaking the research as a PhD student at the University of Southampton and that the findings would contribute to my thesis. Once they had agreed to take part in an interview, I also asked participants to sign a consent form to ensure that they were aware of what was required from them in terms of time and effort, about how the data would be used and the measures taken to anonymise data and protect their identities (Appendix C). I also made clear that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any

stage. The formality of obtaining consent led to a variety of responses. Often people signed the form in an apparently casual way without reading it. But some read it closely before signing and one or two questioned me, particularly checking the status of anonymity. It has been noted that obtaining consent forms could be seen as increasing bureaucratisation and rule-based ethics in social research potentially reducing the researcher's room for making ethical judgements in the course of their research (Wiles et al., 2006). There were a variety of positions taken by the respondents in respect of anonymity that did not always fit easily into the requirements of the consent form which was based on the assumption that respondents needed their identity details protected. Some respondents were indeed concerned not to be identified in the study, because this allowed them to speak more freely and critically and I valued the insights this provided. But there were some others who wanted their comments to be attributed to them and were not concerned about being identified. However to protect the group as a whole and myself, the use of a consent form provided reassurance and an indicator that the research was well managed.

My respondents were predominantly civil servants, advisors or contractors and did not constitute a vulnerable group, in terms of their age, disabilities, or their physical or mental health although it was possible that amongst the selected respondents, some individuals might have exhibited unforeseen vulnerabilities. There were also potential career or reputational implications. I remained alert to the possibility that during the process of interviewing, information, opinions or personal stories could be revealed that respondents subsequently regretted. It is in the nature of qualitative interviews that trust is established and openness encouraged. On some occasions, I asked whether the respondent was willing to let something stay on record and I respected their response. Generally, respondents were very much aware of what they wanted to reveal and would pre-empt me by saying, 'this is off the record', or 'this is for background, but please don't use it directly.' On other occasions, they were happy for me to use controversial information as long as identifying details were removed.

For the participant observation part of the process, my main concern was that I should be open about my status as a researcher. I initially approached the organiser of the meetings to ensure that she was comfortable with my attendance in that capacity. There is a short process of everyone introducing themselves to the group at the beginning of the meeting so I was able to use that opportunity to briefly explain what I was doing. This has been important as there are a significant number of new members at each meeting. Although as far as I am aware, I am the only person using the group as a research method, they are accustomed to researchers attending the meeting and it has not caused any discernible anxiety amongst attendees.

3.4.2 Anonymisation and confidentiality

> Anonymity refers specifically to removing or obscuring the names of respondents or research sites, and not including information that might lead respondents or research sites to be identified.
>
> (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011:198)

The information consent form that interview respondents were asked to sign refers to the anonymisation of quotes arising from the interview. Some respondents dismissed the need for anonymisation of their material altogether, although most of the respondents were happy with the assurance given. One person questioned me quite closely as to whether anonymity was really possible and another person asked me to let him see any of his quotes, if used, prior to publication. I have been careful to do all that I can to ensure anonymity by changing names and removing all identifying details such as government departments, specific times, or places and obscuring gender and age specifications.

However applying the principles of anonymisation is problematical in practice. One issue is whether the quality of data suffers from removal of specific details. The removal of too much detail can lessen the potential of data for re-use (Corti et al., 2000). It is also the case that some individuals preferred to be identified (Wiles et al., 2006: 291). Much of the discussion in the literature centres on what is the appropriate level of anonymisation and whether harm would be caused by identification in all cases (Thompson, 2008). In conducting the research, I took the view that it was important to be assiduous in removing identifying information even through some of the finer details might be lost. It was impossible to know what the consequences of disclosure might be, within the context of this relatively small, but highly networked group of people.

Confidentiality in research is concerned with who will have access to data and how the data will be used (Wiles et al., 2006). In the UK, researchers are covered by the Data Protection Act (1998) which lays down principles with regard to security of information, accuracy and relevance and protection of identities. I have ensured that the research data is kept stored securely on password protected computers and as hard copy in a locked filing cabinet. I also took care that the data was presented in such a way as to remove identifiers, through the use of pseudonyms or codes.

3.4.3 Access

In terms of access, I usually approached civil servants, who formed the majority of the sample, in the first instance through civil service channels. This was either by phoning them or by email. I was always careful to say from the beginning that I was not acting in my work capacity but as an independent researcher. Non civil servants were approached through publicly accessible emails. For all contacts, I initially used my university email although I sometimes followed up using my work based email. In many cases, other interview respondents either recommended people to interview or introduced me to people they thought would be useful. A few potential interviewees turned me down either through lack of time or because they did not consider the research was relevant to their work. Most of those I interviewed were interested in what I was doing and very helpful, often they followed up a day or so later with recommendations for interviews, reading, web-links or other resources they thought I would find useful.

3.5 Insider and/or outsider?

My role as an employee of a government department provided me with an 'insider status' and privileged access to some but not all of my interview respondents which is worth reflecting upon and exploring. 'Insiders' are individuals who have a place in the social group being studied before the start of the investigation (Moore, 2012: 11). It is suggested that insider role status frequently allows researchers more rapid and more complete acceptance by their respondents. Therefore, respondents are typically more open with researchers so that there may be a greater depth to the data gathered (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009: 58).

It is probable that my 'insider' status had a role in helping to gain access to respondents and additionally in establishing trust. Data from the transcripts show that there were some effects within the interview context with civil servants in particular. It was common for civil servants to use the pronoun 'we' throughout the interview as in 'as we know' or 'we've all experienced'. Some of the respondents expressed complicity on matters they thought we were in agreement about, such as dealings with Ministers or managing responses from the public. The use of jargon and acronyms was also very frequent. Another possible effect was that respondents felt my knowledge of government procedures and policies acted as a short-cut for them, meaning they had to spend less time on explaining the background and potentially resulting in thicker and richer information. Although this appears to be entirely beneficial there was the risk that either they or I would assume too much familiarity and therefore fail to explore their individual experience fully. It has also been argued that an outsider could appreciate the wider

perspective, with its connections, causal patterns, and influences, rather more than someone with an internal perspective (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009: 59).

Although the insider/outsider debate is often presented as a binary either/or status, my experience in conducting the research was that my position was fluid. This reflects the view that the researcher's status as an insider or an outsider changes at various points in a research project, and with different groups and individuals (Moore, 2012: 11). With some respondents I was seen as an insider but with others, there was little or no feeling of being 'one of them'. The group I was interviewing was not homogenous; as well as the distinction between civil servants and non-civil servants, there were also significant differences both within the categories and between the respondents and myself in status, expertise and power. It is difficult, if not impossible, to fully resolve the insider-outsider question but in maintaining awareness of my position as a researcher and finding ways to work within the tensions created, I have sought to create a bridge between positions, or a space in between rather than trying to define a position too rigidly (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

3.6 Data collection to data analysis

The amount of data collected through the methods described above was considerable and the next stage of the research project was to find ways of managing the data. The data analysis stage can be described as fundamentally about data reduction because unless it is reduced and gathered into groups and categories it would become impossible to interpret (Bryman, 2012). In qualitative research, data collection and analysis processes are often not separate but tend to be concurrent, with new analytic steps informing the process of additional data collection and new data informing the analytic processes. However analysis also occurs as an explicit step in conceptually interpreting the data set as a whole, using specific analytic strategies such as coding to transform the raw data into a new and coherent depiction of the thing being studied (Thorne, 2000: 68).

Coding can be a confusing term as it is used in quantitative studies to measure responses whereas in qualitative work, it is used alongside other terms such as indexing, categorisation or themes to denote ways of thinking about the text , noticing phenomena, collecting examples and finding commonalities, differences, patterns and structures (Gibbs, 2007). Identifying themes and coding text enables the organisation of the data into component parts which are linked to similar theoretical or descriptive ideas. Coding is a process of data reduction and data complication, it can transform, expand or reconceptualise the data, generating new ideas, theories and frameworks (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 29). Rather than a simplistic or

mechanistic approach, coding is a means of interacting with and interrogating the data in order to reflect upon what emerges and to make new discoveries.

An important part of the process is the sorting and ordering of data. This is not only a practical task, the choices made in choosing categories and what is selected or not selected are not neutral (Mason, 2002: 148). What is included and what is excluded involves making assumptions about the types of phenomena catalogued. It is about what is held to constitute 'data' and how those data are to be interpreted, assigning data to categories and indexing them. The to-and-fro process between coding the data and making sense is an iterative and creative process. Mason (2003) describes it as a dialectical process in which there is a constant moving back and forth between data, experience and wider concepts. My tactics included searching for links or commonalities across the data, as well as the discontinuities and what seemed not to fit. I looked for recurring patterns and themes.

There are two approaches to developing codes. The concept driven or deductive approach starts with the development of key thematic ideas drawn from existing literature and the research question. The data is then fitted to those key themes. The second approach, data driven or inductive coding, does not begin with a list of codes; the purpose with this bottom-up approach is to see what themes or ideas emerge during the coding process as a way of avoiding preconceptions. Both approaches have their advocates and theoretical grounding but many qualitative researchers use a combination of both and they need not be exclusive (Gibbs, 2007). For this study, I used a hybrid approach. Five categories were initially selected, drawn from the emergent themes in the literature, as the basis for the construction of codes: democratic understandings; participation in policy; use of digital technologies in government; the civil service as an institution; and the role of political discourse. A sixth category on the operation of networks was added as its relevance became apparent during the research. Within these categories, smaller sub-categories were defined. As the analysis developed, these were refined or regrouped as part of the constant iterative process between the data and the research questions. At the initial stage, analysis of the data was guided by the preliminary codes but during the coding process new inductive codes emerged and were assigned to data segments which described new themes or ideas.

I used NVivo, a software package for Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) to support the administrative mechanics of data analysis, thereby saving time and freeing the researcher from manual clerical work. It provides an alternative tool to the pen/paper/highlighter/scissors approach (Carcary, 2011: 14). One of the drawbacks to a

single person research is that although a consistent approach to coding was followed and this can be traced though the memos and research notes, much depends on my interpretations of the data rather than the collective insights from other people with different understandings and experiences. However, by using NVivo, the process by which my codes were generated is transparent and recorded. If a follow up study was undertaken by other researchers, the documentation in NVivo would enable them to reproduce the codes and understand their underlying coherence. Using NVivo is an aid to the organisation of data and it shows the working process, but it is important not to over-emphasise the power of the technology. It is not capable of the intellectual and conceptualising processes required to transform data into meaningful findings which remains the responsibility of the researcher.

Although the methodological literature recognises that there are problems and dangers associated with coding, it is also noted that it continues to be significant in most research strategies and is widely accepted in the research community (Bryman, 2012). There is a tension between understanding the data in context and the de-contextualisation that happens through the data sorting and coding process. To provide a coherent imaginative analysis, the data eventually needed to be 're-contextualised' by placing the separated out data back into the complexities of the situated social world from which it had been extracted.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the aims of the research, the problems to be investigated and set up a coherent framework through which the research questions could be addressed. The research methods and process have been explained and the links between them demonstrated. The problems and challenges of interviewing, participant observation and documentary analysis have been debated and situated within the methodological literature. The ethical concerns generated by the research were also explored and discussed. Perhaps what this chapter has not fully conveyed is the inherent messiness of social research (Bryman, 2012) and indeed all forms of research. This refers not only to the inevitable mistakes, false turns and unexpected situations that any research must deal with but it is also whether in setting out the research methods, the complexity of what happens on the ground becomes obscured. It is possible that presenting a picture of methodological neatness implies that by applying methods with care and rigour the 'correct answer' will be reached. I have indicated in my discussions about methods selected that some 'mess' is inevitable, and indeed valued, as new understandings emerged as a result.

The research design was defined by the research questions and by the particular ontological and epistemological perspectives that frame the research, namely that the thesis seeks to more fully comprehend e-democracy through investigating how key actors in their conceptualisation and enactment interpret and navigate their situation. The methods therefore were selected as appropriate to the questions being addressed. This is not however, to imply that decisions are made only at one point in the research process. The iterative aspect of qualitative research means methodological dilemmas and decisions were continuously checked and re-checked to judge their effectiveness and coherence as the thesis progressed. This chapter has explored how methods were selected and explained how they were deployed in the conduct of this research. The next chapter begins the process of analysing the data by examining the role and content of government documents

Chapter 4: From modernisation to transparency: how public participation is conceived in government documentation

The modern world is made through writing and documentation.

(Prior, 2003: 4)

4.1 The significance of government documents

This part of the thesis moves from discussion about research goals and design to analysis of the empirical data generated from documents, interviews and participant observation. The value of undertaking qualitative empirical investigation into the role of policy actors in e-democracy is to immerse oneself in the rich, contextual and local nature of e-democracy. This chapter analyses documentary data on e-democracy articulated through rhetoric and promises offered about what could be achieved. What was the vision of e-democracy, the aims and hopes? Government documents are a primary source of data and it was often within official papers that the vision of e-democracy and other transformative aspects of technology were initially voiced.

The aim of the chapter is to describe and analyse the government's conceptualisation of online democratic engagement as it is presented through the medium of selected official papers. By examining the documents on government-citizen online interactions, I investigated the narratives that emerged from successive governments' efforts to understand and use digital technologies in their relationship with the public. The empirical data, drawn from the official papers, shows how dominant ideas and discourses persist over time as they interact with the wider policy landscape, even when they develop or shift in relation to political events and agendas, changing technological possibilities and understanding.

Documents are central to the development and maintenance of organisations, (Grant et al., 2004: 340). They structure and legitimate ideas and ways of thinking, coordinate and define relationships and activity, validate some options and exclude others. Documents are central to the professional identities of civil servants and the work they do (Freeman and Maybin, 2011: 162). Government documents enable communication of standardised messages to public officials and external audiences over time and in different locations. The written papers

become published texts which are the official and collective statements or views of the government and serve as reference points for successive actors and actions over time.

Documents are not just containers of content, they have functions. They are active agents in networks of action (Prior, 2008a: 822). Documents do things in the world although not always in ways that their authors may have intended. Their circulation and activation in specific social and cultural contexts is unpredictable (Prior, 2008a: 824). A primary characteristic of documents is their mobility, they quickly move beyond the grasp of authors and publishers. In moving between different groups, meanings are constructed and negotiated and concepts shift and take on different meanings (Brown and Duguid, 1996: 7) as they become entangled in particular relationships and histories. Government documents bring together multiple social relations which incorporate both collaborative and resistant elements. Civil servants have a complex role in the production and dissemination of official documents. They are often both authors and part of the intended audience for the messages in the papers. In addition, they have a role in implementing recommendations, instituting practices and interpreting the contents to other policy actors such as campaigners, software developers and academics.

In the examination and comparison between the written, collaborative and agreed text and the storylines to which policy actors subscribe about democratic participation, further insights can be generated concerning the gap between what governments say they want and what happens. Government documents are often used as instruments of control to define what is acceptable, what good practice looks like and who can take particular actions. Control may also be exercised in more subtle ways for instance what is privileged or neglected in documents and how language is used to determine who gains access to documents even if they are publicly available.

Governments use documents to negotiate meanings, which are created and contested through discursive interactions between organisational actors. The papers are examined not only for what is said but also by observing the rhetorical linkages, emphases and absences to extract how government tries to fix meanings and define what is legitimate knowledge (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 140) . Hidden behind the publication is a history of negotiation and discussion among political actors on how topics are portrayed. The published papers are the agreed outcome of conflicting ideas, competing processes and differing forms of organisation. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) refer to documents as 'social facts', which are produced, shared, and used in socially organised ways. They are assembled from diverse sources to depict a persuasive view of what could or should happen. They also perform a representative function for the government to internal and external audiences. The language used, the visual representations

(logos, photos, data charts and tables) and conventions such as Ministerial forewords are intended to convey concepts of authority, legitimacy, and rationality (Ball, 2011: 128) and in doing so seek to establish their dominance over alternative narratives.

4.1.1 Definitions

Definitions of what constitutes a 'document' are not necessarily straightforward. Bryman (2008: 515) defines documents as 'materials that can be read (in the broad sense of the term) and have not been produced specifically for the research and are preserved for analysis'. Another definition focuses on the physicality of documents including the use of electronic means to store and display text:

> Documents may be regarded as physically embodied texts where the containment of the text is the primary purpose of the physical medium
>
> (Scott, 2006: 15)

This idea of a document draws attention to the material properties of documents. Official documents have an existence that continues after their initial publication. Although documents are highly mobile they also have the property of immutability, their materiality enables them to extend the scope and reach of governments in time and space (Freeman and Maybin, 2011: 160). Their stability allows them to be referenced and provided as proof, substantiation and confirmation. They show the history and development of ideas in e-democracy and provide a framework and structure for actions.

In much of the literature examining policy documents, there is an implicit assumption that documents express decisions and actions follow as a consequence. This positivist, rationalist interpretation remains widespread not least amongst policy makers (Freeman and Maybin, 2011: 158). An alternative approach taken here is that government documents are part of the wider web of activity feeding into policy ideas and construction. Ideas and meanings are constructed relationally through experiences and social interactions which build discursive formations by contesting, explaining or promoting aspects of government policy.

In examining government papers, an issue that emerged in the research was whether to consider internal documents circulating within government in addition to documents that are publicly accessible. The advantage of looking at documents that circulate within government would be to see how documents speak to internal audiences, whether the language and messages are different from external papers and to gain insight into how documents develop through the iterative process of drafting and re-drafting. One disadvantage was my partial

knowledge of what was available. Unless the documents were known to me through my work as a civil servant or through the fieldwork or literature review, I would not be able to know they existed. Making use of documents that could be seen as confidential or sensitive also had implications for my role as a civil servant. A potential course of action would have been to make Freedom of Information (FOI) requests for specific documents. Of necessity, these would be restricted to documents that I already knew existed and that did not fall under FOI exclusions. For the purposes of the thesis, I decided to focus on publicly accessible documents. These enabled me to contrast the finalised agreed statements of government, the rhetorical and formal level of discourse, with the interviews and participant observation which examined how civil servants and associates talked about their everyday experiences and perceptions.

4.2 UK Government documents studied

The dataset covers the period 1996-2013. The first government document that focused on the emerging role of Web technologies in government, *Government Direct: A prospectus for the electronic delivery of government* was produced by the Conservative Government under John Major. The most recently published paper in the dataset, *Social media guidance for Civil Servants (supplement),* was published in 2013. All the documents in the dataset were published by the government and the focus was on government's engagement with citizens, predominantly through the use of digital technologies, although the documents also acknowledged that modes of engagement always involve a component of offline engagement as well as online.

On this basis 32 documents were selected in total (see Appendix C for the full list): These were divided into the following categories:

a) Policy papers, including white papers, green papers and department authored policy papers. These are the majority of the sample and contain developing ideas and meanings about technologies and their application to government policy as well as making visible issues and concerns about organisational structures and reducing costs.
b) Government commissioned expert advisory reports explore more experimental ideas advocated by the authors and which the government does not have to commit to implementing but have nevertheless been influential in determining policy directions;
c) Audit reports on government activity monitor what government has done or has promised to do, they report on mistakes and make recommendations and therefore portray the gap between promises and implementation;

d) Guidance documents for civil servants, providing advice to civil servants in the implementation of policy, they often highlight areas of anxiety for civil servants and references to wider organisational norms.

4.2.1 Key documents

From the full dataset of government documents, I focused on a selected number of documents that seemed to exemplify turning points in government thinking about their use of Web technologies in relation to citizens. These documents, even by their titles, are illustrative of the government's evolving approach to digital government-citizen interaction (see Appendix C for the timeline). The documents have a special resonance as signposts along the narrative journey. They are situated at significant historical junctions or signal new policy directions. They carried out important legitimating functions in that they were used to uphold or endorse certain courses of action or justify change. They continue to act as a source of reference, within government and externally, to add authority to discussions and decisions. The analysis that follows largely concentrates on these texts although there are references to other documents in the wider dataset.

Document title	Publication date	Category
Modernising Government	1999	Policy paper
In the Service of Democracy	2002	Policy paper
Transformational Government	2006	Policy paper
Government on the Internet	2007	Audit report
A review of the government's use of social media	2007	Guidance
The power of Information	2007	Advisory report
A national framework for greater citizen engagement	2008	Policy paper
Smarter Government	2009	Policy paper
Directgov 2010 and beyond	2010	Advisory report
Civil Service reform	2012	Policy paper
Open Data	2012	Policy paper

Table 2: Selected government documents

4.2.2 Analysing content, consumption and circulation of documents

In examining the content of the documents, my approach draws upon work by policy discourse analysts on discourses and discursive formations showing how language is used in documents. Such discourses have consequences in terms of agendas, resource allocation and practices (see Fischer and Gottweiss, 2012, Hajer, 1993). Political action and practices are grounded in language, enabling people to frame questions, agree meanings and propose solutions. In the context of e-democracy, discourse analysis enables interpretation of officially produced knowledge about participation and uses of technologies. Additionally, bearing in mind Foucault's notion of 'governmentality', I examine how documents 'make visible the particular ways in which government practices are made thinkable and actionable, how certain domains are problematized and how subjects and behaviours are imagined' (Henman, 2013: 1401).

Analysing the papers shows how distinct aspects of discourses develop and become powerful at different times. These do not always follow a linear or sequential pattern. Sometimes one aspect appears to diminish in influence only to reappear later in different guises. Over the period of time that the documents cover (1996-2013) certain concepts are seen to recur, shaping perceptions and practices and by doing so, constrain or open up different types of participative opportunities and different understandings of the role of the citizen. In identifying and mapping the wider discourses within which e-democracy is situated, we can see how the government sets the discursive framework that shapes the iterative relationship between policy and practices and the influences on the policy landscape.

This chapter further considers how documents are read and used, their role as actors and instigators of action within particular networks. Government documents in particular are often perceived as expressions of decisions that readers are encouraged or obliged to act upon. In the literature on policy documents, the power of the document to instigate policy change is frequently assumed; in some cases, documents are even written about as if it is they themselves that effect the change (Freeman and Maybin, 2011: 158). However, outcomes of actions are not always as expected, the process of implementation generates complexities or comes across unforeseen barriers that modify or alter what happens.

It is instructive to examine the movement and mobility of the documents. Once produced, they go out into the world and circulate amongst networks. They are read by multiple audiences including civil servants, academics, practitioners, campaigners and commentators. Their existence prompts written commentary, reaction and position statements by interested parties. In operationalising the document, strategies, plans, projects, working parties and

discussion groups will be set up and more documents will be produced in response. Ideas within documents travel from site to site, modified by contact with different groups of actors and in the process affecting other associated concepts, forming new identities and objects as they go. In the context of e-democracy the focus is on where documents go and how ideas within them are changed. What does e-democracy become as it goes through this process?

4.3 Discourses in government documents

4.3.1 Modernisation

The idea of modernisation of government as it is imagined in official documentation is powerful but at the same time it is slippery to define, changing shape and emphasis over time and with shifting political agendas. Despite this, there are consistent aspects of modernisation that focus on bureaucratic reform, service delivery, improvement of policy making, performance management, user choice and reduction of costs. Within the discourse, ambiguities and contradictions often become apparent when attempts are made to apply the principles of modernisation to practices, for example between joined up government and local communities, or between user choice and establishing quality standards. Modernisation is inherently normative; it embodies values and beliefs about efficiency, progress, and the opportunities of technology. In some documents the values are explicit (HM Government., 1999: 5) whereas in other documents modernisation is presented as value-free, rational and functional (Varsey, 2006, National Audit Office, 2007, Carter, 2009). The power of modernisation derives from understanding it as a narrative structure, it tells a story of transformation, progression and change. The different aspects of the discourse are linked through a common thread, a storyline, setting up the opportunity for the discourse to construct its own coherence over time (Keller, 2011: 59-60) despite the inherent contradictions.

When the Labour Party was elected in 1997, their key concerns were modernisation, public sector reform, and greater efficiency in public service delivery. In the *Modernising Government* white paper, modernisation is explained by Tony Blair in his foreword as:

> The Government has a mission to modernise – renewing our country for the new Millennium… But modernisation must go further. It must engage with how government itself works. Modernising government is a vital part of our programme of renewal for Britain.
>
> (HM Government., 1999: 4)

It was presented as a new direction although there were significant continuities with the previous Conservative administration. Under the Conservatives, modernisation was conceptualised as reform of the public sector. New Public Management (NPM) was influential in public administration in the 1980s and 1990s. It emphasised market led reforms such as the transfer of private sector management systems and techniques to the public sector, new structures for the delivery of public services and the introduction of quasi-markets, flexible contracts and incentivisation through performance management and bonuses (Hood, 1991).

Labour incorporated many of the principles of NPM, although with a distinctly technological slant, and an optimistic view of what Web technologies in particular could achieve.

> Information technology is revolutionising our lives, including the way we work, the way we communicate and the way we learn. The information age offers huge scope for organising government activities in new, innovative and better ways and for making life easier for the public by providing public services in integrated, imaginative and more convenient forms like single gateways, the Internet and digital TV.
>
> (HM Government., 1999: 9)

Modernising Government's perspective on modernisation was dominated by Blair's managerialism-led approach. It included many ideas that still continue to hold sway. In the white paper, we can see the construction of the role of the citizen as consumer. There is a focus on reforming public services through greater efficiencies and reducing the cost of delivery. This is fused with the belief that reform of the civil service was an essential element of improving government. There was however, little emphasis in *Modernising Government's* about increasing participation in policy making or in decision formation.

In *Transformational Government,* the reforms identified were not only cultural but also structural, addressing the perceived duplication of services and lack of technical skills (Cabinet Office, 2006: 12). The fragmented nature of the government offering on public services was criticised by *The Government on the Internet* report which drew attention to the fact that all the different departments ran their own websites, often with navigation that reflected the bureaucratic structure rather than a customer focus (National Audit Office, 2007: Summary 5-10). There was a change of emphasis in the 2009 paper, *Smarter Government*, although the key characteristics of modernisation remain. In *Smarter Government*, elements of the later Transparency agenda emerged through a focus on accountability, conceived as a new relationship between the public and officials. In the foreword, Gordon Brown states:

> We will embrace new technology to better inform the public; give citizens new rights to information; create a new dialogue between people and public service professionals; and reduce bureaucratic burdens. Public services will improve as they become more personal and more cost-effective, and at the same time they will strengthen democratic deliberation and control in local communities
>
> (HM Government., 2009: 7)

In *Smarter Government* the shift in emphasis from individual consumption of services to a focus on communities became evident. This was linked to documents that foregrounded citizen activity in the local context such as the *Local Government White Paper (*DCLG, 2006) and *Communities in Control* (HM Government, 2008). In their analysis of the links between modernisation and participation under New Labour, Fenwick and McMillan (2012) argue that improved administrative performance was intrinsically associated with increased participation in Labour's ideological framework.

In contrast, the Coalition government approach to modernisation emphasised improving civil servants digital skills and opening up policy making to the public. A distinctive and continuous aspect of modernisation portrays the civil service as an alternative and undemocratic repository of power, because of its apparent influence over policy making, lack of accountability of senior civil servants and opacity of its organisational processes. Such discursive positioning highlights the power relations between administrative and political actors.

> Whitehall has a virtual monopoly on policy development, which means that policy is often drawn up on the basis of too narrow a range of inputs and is not subject to rigorous external challenge prior to announcement.
>
> (HM Government., 2012a: 14)

There is an underlying perception of digital technologies in official papers that affects policy and practices around government-citizen engagement. A degree of implicit technological determinism pervades the documents. The publication of *Transformational Government* with its subtitle, '*enabled by technology'* (Cabinet Office, 2006*),* reflects this largely instrumental and deterministic view. The three main aspects of the document are: customer-centric services, shared services and professionalism (including reliable project delivery, strategic supplier management and CIO Council IT expenditure. It is a more internally facing document than *Modernising Government,* aimed at developing capacity within government departments and changing the way government administration works. It is closely linked with a review

commissioned by the Chancellor in 2006 *Service transformation: A better service for citizens and businesses, a better deal for the taxpayer* (Varsey, 2006) and consequently focuses strongly on opportunities for saving money and improving efficiency in public service delivery.

4.3.2 Transparency of government

The second narrative theme in the government documents is in many ways connected to ideas of modernisation, but it has distinctive aspects of its own. Transparency in public life has been a significant concern for successive governments. Government policy has emphasised the use of data to increase accountability of government and influence delivery of services. The political momentum behind the agenda suggests that one of the purposes of open data is to make government transparent, accountable and subject to scrutiny by individual citizens through the use of information technology and the proactive disclosure of official information:

> Transparency is already radically changing the way people live their lives and run their businesses in the UK. In the last two years the UK has released the largest amount of government data of any country in the world, enabling people to make better choices about the public services they use and to hold government to account on spending and outcomes.
>
> (Cabinet Office., 2012: 10)

The construction of meanings around open data therefore, links long standing issues such as reform of the public sector, improvements in service delivery with the belief that if data is 'out there' citizens will be empowered to use it in a variety of innovative and democratic ways (Cabinet Office., 2012: 5). This is combined with new developments in technology which enable a huge increase in data generation of all kinds together with the means to store and share data more effectively.

All government departments are required to publish an Open Data Strategy which sets out the priorities for their departments and how and by when they will be achieved (Data.gov.uk, 2012, Cameron, 2011a) The Coalition presented the development of Open Government Data (OGD) as a radical transformation of British politics (Cameron, 2011b) linking together elements of modernisation with aspects of democratic participation. The desired combination of better performance of public services with an empowered and engaged public has significant continuities with the previous administration's approach, particularly in its last few years (HM Government., 2009, Mayo and Steinburg, 2007). Gordon Brown was a strong advocate of using technologies to access and share government information and whilst

Chancellor he instituted a review to look into overcoming barriers to the re-use of official information.

OGD is additionally concerned with the economic value of the government data for example in mapping, land use, and public transport. By making this data available to software developers, businesses and other interested parties, the government believes they will generate greater innovation, economic opportunities and job creation (Cabinet Office., 2012: 15). The different strands of open government and open data are often combined and merged in the discourse presented in government documents, eliding the concept of transparency (Cabinet Office., 2012: 5, HM Government., 2009: 12, Cameron, 2011b) with democratic influence. The Centre for Public Scrutiny (2013: 4) points out however that open data does not on its own ensure accountability.

Through analysis of the documents we can see that the themes of transparency and accountability incorporate discourses on openness and accessibility and in their emphasis on technology are closely aligned with the open government data agenda. Transparency in government is difficult to define and evaluate. The empirical research indicates that often the terms transparency and accountability are used interchangeably but transparency and accountability are not the same (Centre for Public Scrutiny, 2013: 6). A transparent organisation may have processes that are clearly visible but that does not mean that it feels an obligation to explain or justify its actions. Accountability itself is a complex concept. Civil servants may experience multiple and overlapping forms of accountability to managers, ministers, audit bodies or parliament for example, and research has shown that some officials interpret accountability quite narrowly (Lupson and Partington, 2011:897). Within the theme of transparency there is much that is closely related to the modernisation principles of reducing costs, improving services and implementing bureaucratic reform, as well as using open government data to generate economic growth (National Audit Office., 2012: 29). This approach is uppermost in the Coalition approach but alongside this approach, government documents also construct increased transparency and accountability as opportunities for democratic engagement (HM Government., 2009: 19, Cabinet Office., 2012: 5), although this is a more minor emphasis.

4.3.3 Updating democratic participation

In government documents, the two linked discourses of 'modernisation' and 'transparency' were dominant in terms of the quantity and density of references within documents and across the range of the dataset. Their ascendency can be discerned not only by the repetition of

terms linked to them but also by the assumptions made about options and actions; and how subsequent documents reference earlier ones as a means of legitimation and positioning, establishing a conceptual framework through which government activity is conceived. The question therefore, that needs to be asked is; how are ideas of participation developed and understood within the context of these dominant discourses?

Modernisation is often portrayed as a competing discourse to the discourse on participation but there are links that can be made between the discourses, not only in terms of interpreting empowered consumers as a type of participation but also in the sense that New Labour viewed the old democratic institutions as outmoded, which along with other state apparatus needed updating (Fenwick and McMillan, 2012: 368). Through this lens, the mechanisms and relationships of participation required modernisation and renewal.

E-democracy as government policy

It is this idea of updating and modernising participation that shows how e-democracy came to be framed. There were several potential directions that the application of technologies to increasing democratic participation could have taken, so how did this idea of e-democracy come to be constructed? The roots can be traced back to the Blair government's broader modernisation agenda. Blair stated in *New Britain*, that New Labour wanted 'a new relationship between the individual and the state' (Wright, 2006a, Coleman and Moss, 2013). Although concern about citizen participation and engagement cannot be solely linked to Labour, it was the combination of anxiety about the democratic deficit, with the focus on individual responsibility that shaped the idea of citizenship that informs e-democracy.

*In the service of democracy (*Office of the E-Envoy, 2002) brought together two narratives – political concern about the atrophy of citizenship and optimism about the ascendency of technology. By establishing this linkage, an understanding was set up that technology could 'fix' democracy (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 144). *In the service of democracy* was published at a particular historical juncture when household access to the Internet was rising exponentially.

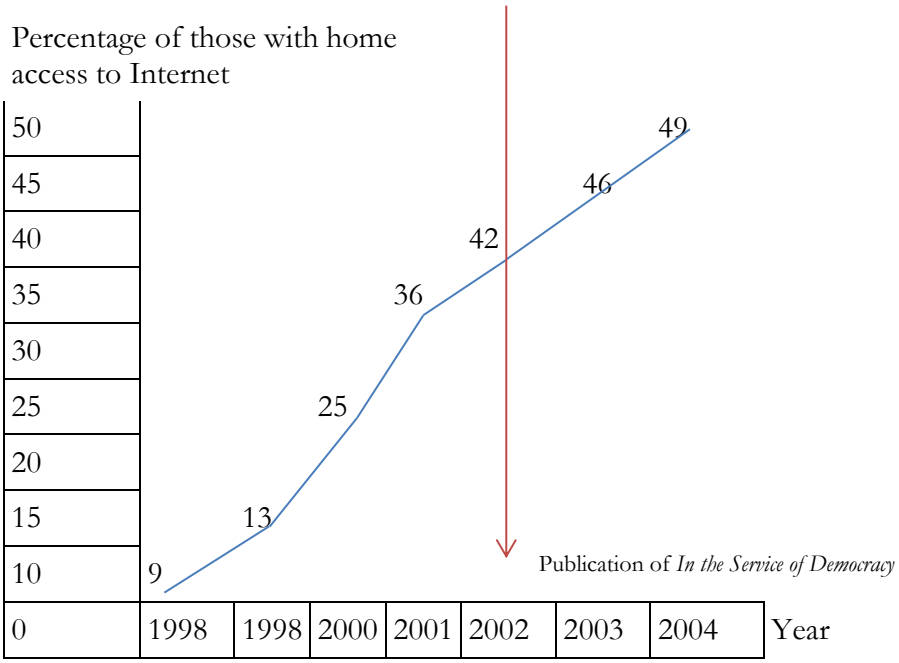

Table 3: Internet access for UK households 1998-2004 (ONS Statistical Bulletin 2012)

This was seen as an opportunity to strengthen democratic participation:

> The dramatic growth of the digital society and the potential for the information revolution to include everyone, coupled with people's hopes and expectations to be able to participate via the Internet, lead to the conclusion that ICT can be an effective channel that will encourage participation.
>
> (Office of the E-Envoy, 2002: 12)

At the same time the document was careful to position e-democracy in support of representative democracy.

> The Government acknowledges that e-democracy is neither an alternative to representative democracy nor a replacement for existing forms of democratic participation.
>
> (Office of the E-Envoy, 2002: 11)

> Democracy is enhanced by citizens' participation in voluntary and nongovernmental organisations, but it also requires their involvement in the formal institutions of democracy.
>
> (Office of the E-Envoy, 2002: 11)

In the service of democracy divided e-democracy into two policy tracks: e-participation and e-voting. The e-voting section prioritised remote online voting to facilitate greater convenience and flexibility for the electorate. The 2001 election turnout was 59 percent, a fall of 12 percent from 1997 (Office of the E-Envoy, 2002: 9) Surveys taken after the election appeared to show that turnout would increase if online voting was available (Office of the E-Envoy, 2002: 41). In the consultation paper, confidence was expressed that e-voting would be relatively straightforward to implement while e-participation was expected to be more complex (Office of the E-Envoy, 2001: 14). However, concerns about security and problems of implementation in e-voting meant that this aspect of e-democracy did not progress.

The impact of *In the service of democracy* has been described as mixed (Wright, 2006a: 240), fragmented and incoherent (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 150). However, it has been influential in defining underlying ideas of what online democratic participation involves. Key elements of e-participation in the consultation support and strengthen representative democracy by focusing on the use of Web technologies in consultation, information provision and civic activity at the community level. The emphasis on e-voting prioritises convenience for the voter feeding into the modernisation discourse on citizens as consumers.

A persistent aspect of the government's approach to increasing citizen participation has been to understand lack of participation to be a consequence of a lack of information about policies. Digital technologies offer increased opportunities for government to provide information on websites and social media. Government documents consistently prioritised the provision of one-way information, and focused on the need for information to be accurate, accessible and reliable. The quality of information is important but it can also been seen as a means of control. The government defines what information is released and when. The language used often merges release of information with participation as though by receiving information, citizens are taking part in government:

> We now live in a century when people access vast amounts of information instantly, create online communities across continents, develop personal relationships with their banks, insurers, and retailers and expect and demand high standards from the people supplying them with services. Our democratic structures have not kept pace with this progress.
>
> (HM Government, 2008: 20)

> Ultimately, a more informed citizen is a more empowered citizen. In a modern democracy citizens rightly expect government to show where money has been spent and what the results have been.
>
> (HM Government., 2009: 25).

This framing has implications for the way government approaches online participation. The discourse on providing information as a source of empowerment is evident in *A National Framework for Citizen Engagement (*Ministry of Justice, 2008)and *Communities in Control,* (HM Government, 2008). Both documents link the concept of empowerment with notions of individual responsibility as a means of shaping policy (HM Government, 2008: 22-23, Ministry of Justice, 2008: 11, Cabinet Office, 2011: 10). In this discourse, the government provides information to allow individuals to make the choices about their behaviour which will affect the services they require, increase feelings of effectiveness and cohesion of communities and strengthen democratic engagement.

4.3.4 Conceptualising citizens

Democratic participation requires citizens who are willing to participate but 'citizens do not simply spring into life' (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 5) they are imagined and constituted in particular ways. Government documents both reflect and cultivate what it means to be a citizen, their relationship to government, expected roles and contributions. At one level, official discourse emphasises that citizen participation is a positive value and enhances democracy.

> Active participation by as many people as possible is essential for a healthy democracy as it encourages a shared understanding, builds cohesion and instils confidence in the institutions and the people who are elected to represent us.
>
> (Ministry of Justice, 2008: 3)

> We believe that the time has come to disperse power more widely in Britain today; to recognise that we will only make progress if we help people to come together to make life better. In short, it is our ambition to distribute power and opportunity to people rather than hoarding authority within government. That way, we can build the free, fair and responsible society we want to see.
>
> (Cameron and Clegg, 2010: 7)

Implicit in this view are understandings of citizenship as active practice, that there are rights and responsibilities attached to being a citizen. Democratic renewal is also about changing the

attitudes and behaviour of citizens (Barnett, 2002: 312). The idea of the citizen as a contributor to government policy is a recurrent theme in many of the documents although it is often also problematized. *Communities in Control* white paper states that:

> But while people want to have a greater say, they need also to be convinced that their involvement will make a difference. If they speak up, they want to know that their voices will be heard.

There is an anxiety in the government documents about how to manage participation and its purpose. In *Effective Public Engagement*, civil servants are advised that it is important to be clear at the outset whether public engagement is appropriate and valuable (Central Office of Information, 2009: 7).

A linked conceptualisation of citizenship in *Communities in Control* (HM Government, 2008) constructs the notion of participation as most effective or meaningful at the local and community level (Farrelly, 2010). On the one hand, the government is offering new opportunities for engagement and collaboration but it also creates a 'strategic/local' boundary that delineates the structure of participation opportunities. The boundary determines which issues can be considered by public participation and which issues remain the province of politicians and officials (Newman et al., 2004: 213).

Further analysis suggests that ideas of active and responsible citizenship became interwoven with ideas of participation in which the citizen interacts with government through a market or consumer-led approach. For instance the Ministry of Justice paper on citizen engagement goes on to say:

> And the Government has also sought to empower people in other, more direct ways in the relationship between government, people and public services. These forms of empowerment range from enhanced choice in health care to the use of public satisfaction targets to drive public service improvements.
>
> (Ministry of Justice, 2008: 10)

It indicates that the government imagines participation in terms of increasing choice or in commenting on service delivery rather than offering opportunities to get involved with the decision-making process. New forms of technology are being incorporated in support of this understanding so that the public is invited to rate public services, to provide feedback and comment on them as a means of improvement.

> We can start by using the data we hold more effectively, and by pushing that data into the public domain. Then individuals, businesses and civil society can use it to vote on public services with their feet, to challenge government if they see inefficiencies and to drive prosperity by using data to do new and exciting things.
>
> (Cabinet Office., 2012)

This analysis of government documents has demonstrated how the meaning and practice of participation is framed by the dominant discourses on modernisation and transparency. These prioritise certain aspects of participation while limiting others. The citizen, particularly under Labour, is also constructed as active at the local level in the community, requiring certain behaviours from citizens and taking responsibility for making choices. The participation of the citizen as a consumer is consistently sought in terms of commenting on and accessing government services. More recently, the citizen has been constituted as an 'armchair auditor' to monitor government spending at both central and local levels and to hold the government to account.

4.4 Purpose and movement of government documents

4.4.1 Establishing authority

Policy documents set out expected paths of actions to be undertaken. The prospect that actions will follow as a consequence of what is written in the document is woven into the fabric of the document. Recipients of the document expect that actions will be undertaken. Language and positioning are used to assure audiences of its authority and weight.

The arrangement of text is designed to demonstrate the authority of government. The foreword is frequently by a government minister (The Civil Service Reform Plan has three forewords by the Prime Minister, Cabinet Office minister and Head of the Civil Service). The format of the documents is arranged to assure audiences of the relevance and purpose of what is needed. Devices such as logos (HM Government or the departmental logo) serve as a visual badge of identity ensuring that they are recognizable at a glance, and imbued with authority (Ball, 2011: 126). White papers, for example have a format matching preceding and parallel white papers, setting up certain expectations (Freeman and Maybin, 2011: 161). There is often an executive summary at the front and as previously noted, a ministerial foreword. Key recommendations are either near the beginning for ease of reference or grouped at the end of the document. The body of the text is arranged in numbered paragraphs, suggesting that the document is not necessarily to be read from beginning to end but is an active tool to be

referenced. Findings and evidence to back up arguments are displayed through graphs and tables and the documents frequently provide pull out boxes of case studies or quotes to highlight points and provide a means of summarising the case. Woolgar (1981, 1988) makes reference to the use of pathing and sequencing devices in papers. The pathing provides a trail of how conclusions and solutions were arrived at, how the reader is guided through the document. Sequencing provides a narrative as to which conclusions were arrived at and are presented as inevitable (Prior, 2003: 131).

In some of the more internally facing documents, for example the *Civil Service Reform Plan*, pathing and sequencing devices are used to set out the problem to be solved, the background (narrative) to the problem and the proposed solutions are presented as the only course to take, closing down alternatives. To add momentum and urgency, actions are stated and given times by which they must be completed.

In papers directed at public consumption, ideas are proposed in a more tentative fashion for consideration:

> The Government believes that greater use of deliberative engagement will add value to the national policy making process by introducing opportunities for a more meaningful dialogue between government and the public. Citizens' juries enable government to engage small groups of citizens in debate, to ask questions and to make informed recommendations. Citizens' summits represent a step further, engaging a larger group of citizens in discussions on a particular topic and potentially allowing them to make a recommendation which could be put to Parliament.
>
> The Government is keen to gather views on proposals for the more systemic use of deliberative engagement within the national policy making process. In particular, the use of **citizens' summits** and **citizens' juries**.
>
> (Ministry of Justice, 2008: 15) Emphasis in original

Nevertheless despite the more open appearance, only certain perspectives are articulated, and specific options are presented and framed. Although discussion is invited, it is within particular terms. Although different participation opportunities are discussed, they are always envisaged within the wider system of representative democracy. The political discourse is about upholding and strengthening electoral politics, about building trust in political representatives.

Sometimes however, what is set out as planned activity does not happen as intended. E-voting was a technologically centred policy and proceeded from an assumption that e-democracy

'seeks to use people's energy to support and enhance the traditional institutions of democracy' (Office of the E-Envoy, 2002: 4, 11). The government appointed the Electoral Commission to undertake trials with a view to introducing e-voting by 2006. The trials undertaken at local level found that there were security risks that appeared difficult to overcome and they also found that turnout was not significantly increased through introducing e-voting (Wright, 2006a: 12). Following the trials, in addition to the practical problems, it seemed that appetite for e-voting was lost. "In reality the barriers to eVoting aren't really technical or procedural, they are cultural," (Williamson, 2013). Despite the firmly expressed proposed policy by the document the outcomes in this situation were not as intended or expected.

The means by which problems are conceptualised enables the solutions offered to be legitimised. In *Directgov 2010 and beyond: revolution not evolution*, the recommendation was to:

> Make Directgov the government front end for all departments' transactional online services to citizens and businesses, with the teeth to mandate cross government solutions, set standards and force departments to improve citizens' experience of key transactions.
>
> (Lane Fox, 2010)

This, together with other recommendations resulted in the creation of Government Digital Service (GDS) and a single government portal, gov.uk. In this instance, the organic growth of websites in departments was problematized. Government departments had previously designed and set up their own websites and were responsible for transactions relating to their departmental business. Multiple websites it was argued reduced the efficiency of the delivery of services. A single website to which all users are directed would provide the solution. On the surface it seemed a sudden and dramatic change. However, unease about the proliferation of departmental websites and the problems for users in following different navigations and information structures can be traced back through other documents. The concept of intertextuality refers to the way documents work with other documents to legitimate and strengthen their position (Bazerman 1988). In this case, the Directgov review drew upon the series of National Audit Office reports looking at the use of technology in delivering public services (Dunleavy and Margetts, 1999, Dunleavy and Magretts, 2002, National Audit Office, 2007) which in turn built on *Transformational Government, Enabled by Technology* and *Service Transformation: A better service for citizens and businesses, a better deal for the taxpayer* (Varsey, 2006, Cabinet Office, 2006).

Another form of legitimation is to demonstrate that experts in the field are on board and supportive of the proposals. For example *Putting the Frontline First, Smarter Government* presents a long list of people who are thanked for their contribution:

> We are grateful for the vision and advice we have received from industry leaders and distinguished public sector thinkers:
>
> (HM Government., 2009: 5-6)

These examples show how the documents structure and authorise certain forms of action by establishing what is problematized and through sequencing and pathing lead to seemingly inevitable solutions. Producers of government documents employ strategies for legitimation including referencing previous documents and enrolling experts to their cause.

4.4.2 Controlling and patrolling boundaries

Government documents as vehicles of discourse express and reproduce norms, patterns of thought and identities or subjectivities. Through documentation, behaviours are shaped and controlled. In documents that are directed towards the civil service, expectations of behaviours are clearly set out:

> All civil servants are bound by terms and conditions including the Civil Service Code. The Code sets out the core values - integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality – and the standards of behaviour expected of us.
>
> And:
>
> The principles covering the use of social media by civil servants in both an official and personal capacity are the same as those that apply for any other media. Social media is a public forum and the same considerations apply as would, say, to speaking in public or writing something for publication either officially or outside of work.
>
> (Government Digital Service, 2012: 3)

Expectations of the level of knowledge and skills civil servants are expected to have is also defined:

> Departments will ensure appropriate levels of digital skills are part of core competencies, performance and objective-setting frameworks at all levels.
>
> (HM Government., 2012b: 24)

Externally facing documents have more implicit expectations of how behaviours are constituted. In *Communities in Control* the role of councillors is constituted as helping citizens understand democracy better:

> But many councils should do more to promote participation. So, we will introduce a new **'duty to promote democracy'** to help councils promote involvement through clearer information, better trained staff and more visible councillors in the community. We will also extend the existing **'duty to involve'** local people in key decisions,
>
> (HM Government, 2008: 2) Emphasis in original

As Farrelly (2010) has noted, the social actors presented are local authorities, local leaders, residents, councillors and community groups rather than those in national government. The focus is on local government providing information about how democracy works at the local level. Democratic participation is framed as what happens at local or hyper-local levels rather than national. *Communities in Control* describes the roles that empowered local people can take up such as becoming a school governor, influencing local community budgets, or having a say in how local services are delivered. In setting out these roles, the document is shaping what is expected of individual citizens, the responsibilities they are allocated and the conduct of participatory activity.

In addition to controlling behaviours, government s documents are mobile artefacts, they go out into the world and in their mobility they operate at the edges of boundaries between local and central government, civil servants and citizens, public, private and not for profit organisations. In their production, they are the outcome of negotiation. The aims, content and intended outcomes are the result of meetings, lobbying, drafts and criticism between different groups.

In the production of documents, actors from different social worlds enter into relations with each other and through this process of interpretation and translation recast and reconstitute their perspectives (Freeman and Maybin, 2011: 160). Once produced, documents continue to play an important role in bringing people together to negotiate and coordinate common practices. In the consumption of documents, recipients do not necessarily share the assumptions of the originators. Further interpretative work needs to go on between the different groups and interests in order to manage practices. In moving between the groups and different understandings, the documents act as boundary objects (Bowker and Star, 1999: 297). They are used by several different communities of practice and have a mediating role to

play between them. Management of boundary objects is a key process in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting communities. Brown (1996) talks about cross-border communities or individuals who are bi-lingual, undertaking the roles of communicating, translating and mediating between the different groups.

This analytical concept can be applied to e-democracy. The idea of e-democracy as it has emerged from government needs the intervention of bi-linguists (or policy actors) to explain and interpret ideas, as well as to implement and evaluate practices. A finding from the empirical research was how many of the policy actors in e-democracy move between government departments, public and private sectors, digital experts, ministers and civil servants. As they move about, they explain, translate and build bridges between the different communities, as one of the interviewees described:

> I run a company …we do a mixture of training, and web development and advice and consultancy to mainly central government. I started as a market researcher, lots of focus groups and interviews and questionnaires and things. Then I moved into government comms, then I worked for a digital agency as a project manager looking after website builds and then back into government.
>
> Stephanie, consultant.

4.4.3 Documents in networks

In considering how documents function in networks, insights from actor network theory (ANT) can be brought into view. From this perspective the documents are more than passive resources, important only to the degree that human actors use them to instigate action. They can also instigate, direct or shape activity as they are brought into the social configuration to be recruited as allies or defined as problematic. Their presence influences the development of the network of which they are part (Prior, 2008a: 828).

To show the part that documents can play, it is helpful to 'follow the actors'. *In the Service of democracy* for example, proposed a two-track policy for the development of e-democracy: e-voting and e-participation. If we look at actors involved in the production of the document and the actors who were drawn into the network as a consequence of the document, we can see how the different elements worked together or strained against one another, how differences were generated in a semiotic logic (Law, 2007: 7) There are links and relations generated between actors. These involve different individuals and organisations, operating at different scales (national/local/community levels) and performing different functions (government/research/advisory). The relations between the actors are defined and shaped

through the document. For example software developers researched new forms of software to operate the e-voting systems, local councils offered themselves as pilots for the scheme or refrained from doing do. Regulations and rules were developed to ensure the probity and security of the system. There were different platforms involved (Web, mobiles, television) and competition between different forms of software. New programmes were generated to manage forms of e-participation requiring funding, tendering processes and new forms of documentation were required to regulate the process. The relationship between the elements was dynamic and precarious; it was continuously generated through the effects produced rather than a stable or enduring set of links.

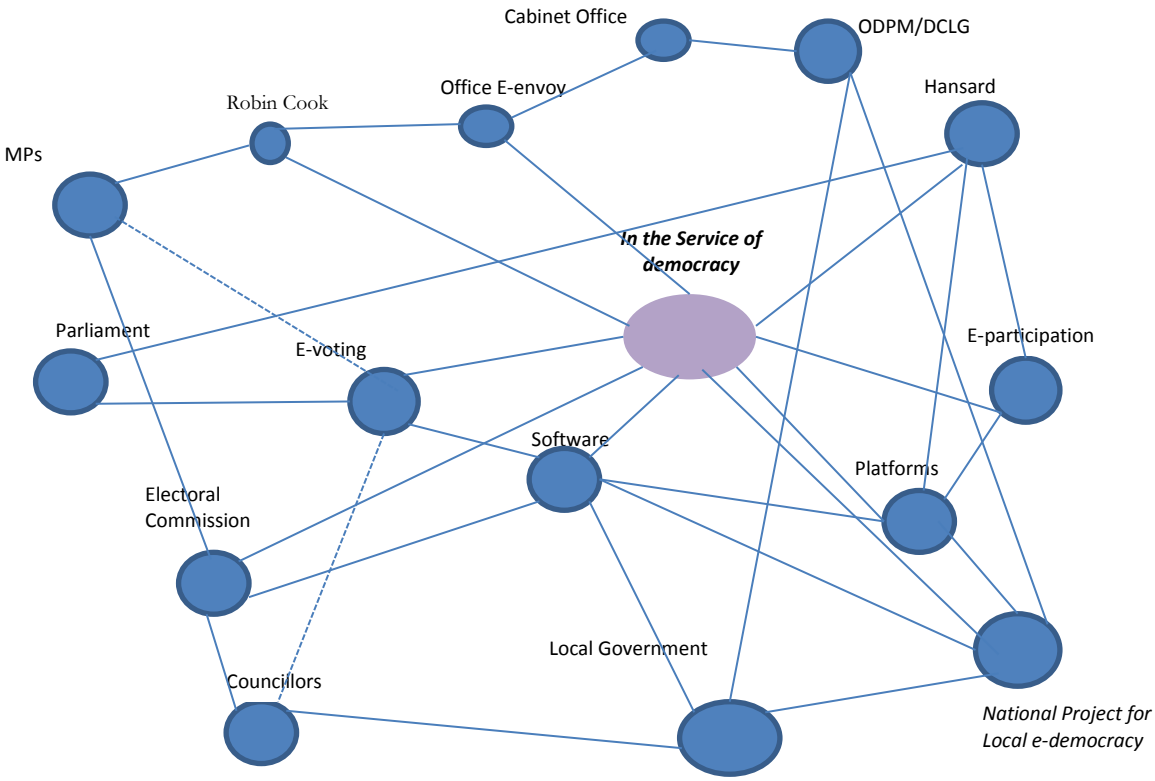

Figure 3: Network of actors through *In the Service of democracy*

Visualizing networks is both helpful in identifying the links that arise between documents and institutions, documents and people, documents and concepts, and documents with each other. Analysing the interdependencies between actors enables a deeper understanding of the connections between them and the effects that are generated through their interactions which may be unpredictable:

> Each actor, each locale, is the point of intersection between forces, and hence a point of potential resistance to any one way of thinking and acting.
>
> (Rose and Miller, 1992: 190)

The documents act as a unifying force, they mediate between decision makers, practitioners and publics. They provide a point of reference which appropriates interests and practices joining them up in new and specific forms.

4.5 Content, function, circulation – bringing it all together

This chapter has sought to develop an understanding of the role selected government documents have played in the emerging conceptualisation and performance of e-democracy. The research question asks 'How do policy actors understand and enact e-democracy?' In investigating the purpose that the documents serve in legitimation and authorisation, their role in shaping behaviours and operating as points of reference, we can see how e-democracy is not a static and fixed concept but a mobile and contested one. The production of documents is the outcome of negotiation and contestation between different groups. Equally the consumption, the reception of the document is not just by one single group but many diverse audiences who adapt and translate it into their particular contexts.

It is notable in examining the government documents that only *In the Service of Democracy* focuses specifically on e-democracy. This in itself says something about the relative priority government gives to e-democracy compared to other uses of digital technologies in government. Analysis of how e-democracy is conceptualised has to be drawn out from other documents, interrogating how e-democracy is shaped through other concerns. So by looking at the range of documents studied, we can see how e-democracy is framed through the prism of modernisation. Web technologies are employed as tools to update and reform both the internal functions of the government and its outward facing products (services, information, open government data). By improving and updating government, citizens will be encouraged to engage and interact with government. Their trust in government and the democratic system will increase because they can see it works better and is more transparent. Democratic renewal through e-democracy moves citizens to participate beyond voting in elections and is seen more broadly as part of active and responsible citizenship, particularly at the local level.

What this conceptualisation of e-democracy omits however, is how the documents are received and acted upon. To consider documents as 'inert containers of content' (Prior, 2008a: 824) tells only part of the story. The other part is how documents are also actors in networks. They are interpreted and translated by multiple groups who use them to further their own interests, modify and adapt them. Policy is enacted through a messy assemblage of texts, technologies, artefacts and architectures becoming in the process something different from that set out in the documents.

In examining the content of the documents as a whole dataset rather than individual components, two core and overarching discourses can be identified which are notable for their prevalence and influence in the conceptualisation of what e-democracy is. These are *modernisation* and *transparency*. Each is interwoven with a multitude of contributing ideas such as constructions of technology, concerns about digital exclusion and understandings of the roles that citizens play. Diverse elements inform and shape the discourses in different ways and with varying levels of emphasis. The resulting synthesis is a complex amalgam in which the different aspects are mutable and contingent rather than separate components. In this chapter, I have shown how constituents of modernisation and transparency, reiterated in the government documents interact and build upon each other and how in turn they shape government ideas of participation and e-democracy.

Modernisation emerges as the central organising discourse in that the aims of modernisation; reforming the public sector, improving services and cutting costs have shaped perceptions of transparency of government and of participation. Within the documents, the idea of the public is constituted largely as a consumer of services, imagined as part of a local community under Labour, or as contributor to economic growth under the Coalition. Participation is constituted as empowerment associated, with people taking responsibility for their behaviour by receiving and acting on information about health or education for example. In this way participation is individualised rather than collective. Democratic participation through voting or through contributing to policy making is also seen through this lens of informed, responsible citizenry. Optimism about the effects of technology is closely linked to the idea of modernisation, articulated as progress and opportunity but at the same time there are anxieties about skills and capacities within government and about detrimental effects of technology on privacy and security. Transparency within government is construed as the means by which the goals of modernisation can be reached and seen to be reached. Transparency is equated with open government by making public information and data more widely available, allowing groups and individuals to monitor and evaluate particular polices and the performance of government. Documents such as *The Power of Information* and *Open Data White Paper* have linked ideas of accountability and democracy together. The citizens is able to scrutinise government using digital technologies and by doing so increase their democratic engagement and interaction with government..

Within the selected documents then, we can see how the discursive themes are constructed and reiterated. They frame how issues such as participation and uses of technologies are on one hand problematized and on the other, how solutions are offered. For civil servants and other actors who are writers and readers of these documents, constructions of e-democracy

and democratic participation are situated within wider discourses. Through their production and consumption of the documents, such understandings are distributed and translated into practices.

Documents have vitality (Prior, 2008a: 833) they are active agents in the actions and reactions that they set off, although as the example of e-voting shows actions generated through documents can be contradictory and unpredictable in outcomes. The documents are best understood in the plural, they refer back to other documents and they generate new documents to realise implementation. Freeman and Maybin (2011) talk about the spaces between documents, the translation of ideas from one to another, about who is making the translations and why? Documents and practices are mutually constitutive, documents make practices knowable and repeatable, and practices require new documents of procedure and regulation. They seek to manage the recipients and publics through defining readership, including some groups while excluding others. *Communities in control,* illustrates how citizens are constituted as participating in local communities in certain ways and councillors are also construed in particular roles. More inwardly facing documents such as *Guidance on effective public engagement* and *Social media guidance for civil servants* aim to regulate civil servants' behaviour in their engagement with citizens, offline and through social media.

A further finding of the chapter was to consider documents as part of multiple networks, enabling them to act as points of recruitment or opposition and investigating the effects this has on other actors in the network and on contingent outcomes. The empirical research shows that policy actors may be collective and anonymous, or they can be named authors. For some publications, the authors are current civil servants or previously employed and now writing as experts, or they may be academics commissioned to provide insight as in *Government on the Internet*. The social interactions between actors generate new ideas and practices, or synthesise current ones. The role of documents in bringing concepts together and giving them shape is in tension with the diversity of actors who contribute to, respond and implement the documents. Hajer's concepts of storylines and discourse coalitions help in understanding how this tension is managed. Actors operating within the discourse use story lines in their communications although this does not mean that they all agree or operate on the same understandings. However the production of the storyline, a shorthand narrative allows them to subscribe to common practices for a period of time (Hewitt, 2009: 11).

The next chapter maps the talk of civil servants around ideas of democratic participation and technology and there are deep links between their verbal discussions and the discourses manifested in the government documents. The talk of policy actors is analysed as they discuss

aspects of e-democracy, their understandings of the value and purpose of citizen participation, how technologies are used and the relationships within and across organisations. Within a dominant discourse there will always be conflicting, unresolved elements and competing discourses. Documents appear to fix understandings in time but investigating the talk of policy actors makes visible the struggle for meanings of what constitutes e-democracy. Actors are social agents who over time seek to bring about change in response to new circumstances and by influencing the content of the dominant discourse. The degree to which actors try to establish new understandings of e-democracy and changes in practices is an empirical task to be undertaken in the following chapters.

Chapter 5: **Insider talk: discursive constructions of e-democracy**

The words you speak become the house you live in.

Hafez (Persian Poet 1315-1390)

5.1 Discourse and talk in e-democracy

In this chapter I consider the everyday talk of policy actors as they discuss, interpret, and transmit their views about e-democracy through a range of channels and in different spaces. The focus is on the content of what they say, the concepts used and the interpretations made. In analysing the talk of policy actors expressed through interviews and participant observation, I examine how their talk reflects and links with what was written in official documents and their modifications or contestations expressed about e-democracy. The chapter looks at the similarities and the differences between actors and the degree to which they reproduce or diverge from wider discourses transmitted through the official papers. In the official documentation, sets of interrelated concepts are put together, structuring and legitimating what is understood as normative and defining what is problematic. The documents enable government to set out how, when and by whom particular issues were discussed or silenced; what interventions were promoted or restrained; and what was changed or continued (Keevers et al., 2008: 461). The focus here is on talk, but the chapter is positioned in relation to the previous discussion on how documents collect and codify understandings drawing upon wider social and political contexts, and the following chapter which focuses on how practices are shaped by discourses (and the degree to which practices potentially modify discourse). Talk and action are not separate entities, rather the talk supplies and limits action strategies and the range of behaviours possible in a given context (Skelcher et al., 2005: 577).

This chapter seeks to investigate and make visible how participants seek to define, classify and delimit understandings of concepts that bear on political actions (Fischer, 2003: 46). The talk of policy actors is shaped by and draws upon wider discourses such as the modernisation of government and the role of transparency and accountability in democratic renewal. Yet such discourses are not static but are contested by competing discourses which challenge established ideas and perceptions. Policy actor discussions about the what, how and for whom of e-democracy are part of this constant struggle over ideas, beliefs and values. By focusing on what is said, the purpose is not to become involved in linguistic analysis at a micro-level focusing on pauses, interruptions or cues but to consider the contribution of policy talk to this

process of discourse formation. Conversation and discussion takes place between policy actors as well as between policy actors and citizens. While not all of these conversations were accessible to me, I was able to witness some of them through the participant observation and on Twitter and other social media channels. Others were reported through the interviews. I started from the position that these discussions were illustrative of the use of language that was intended to shape a view of the world and reality, rather than a neutral medium mirroring it (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005: 176). Actors use discourses strategically in order to contribute to the production of a certain social reality but at the same time they cannot stand outside the discourses that frame their world.

The chapter asks the question 'Who are the actors who are holding these conversations?' My research question is: How do policy actors understand and enact e-democracy*?* I began my research from the position that civil servants have been overlooked in studies of e-democracy. While undertaking the empirical research it became clear that this was more complicated than it first appeared. I discovered that while some of the actors were civil servants there were others who played a significant role in discussing and constructing e-democracy as well as in implementing and evaluating it. The question of who is involved in e-democracy also became one of exploring the connections between different actors, investigating their similarities and their differences and examining the context in which they are situated.

Metaphors of space are used by several policy discourse analysts to evoke sites in which different actors, knowledges and interests may be included or excluded (Cornwall, 2002) and can be understood as something that is created, opened up and shaped by social understandings (Fischer, 2006: 25). This chapter explores how government organisations are discursively constructed by e-democracy policy actors. Through their talk and exchanges, policy actors construct their identity and position themselves in relation to the wider collectives of the civil service and government. Actors' talk about their interactions with physical buildings, as well as virtual digital spaces, opens up new perspectives on how communicative practices are shaped and mediated by understandings of space and place. Stories and accounts related by policy actors about working in or with institutional structures illustrate their influence on actors' preferences, expectations and opportunities.

Through interviews and participant observation, I sought to discover how the policy actors perceived and defined ideas; what was problematised, what positions were taken and what discursive strategies were used. As with the documents chapter, different understandings about citizen participation were explored, although in this chapter the emphasis was on what the actors *said*. The underlying narratives and the use of metaphors in conversations and

discussions were scrutinised. Through my examination, I tried to map what was emphasised and rationalised in order to understand how different constructs were built, or maintained (or in some cases challenged) and where there were points of difference with the government statements and vision expressed in official papers.

I also analysed the different understandings and uses of digital technologies expressed by respondents and their complex, evolving interaction with participation discourses. Views held about the role of technology are illustrative of underlying perceptions and interpretations about public involvement as well as hopes and fears about the opportunities or risks associated with their use of technologies. For some there was a considerable ambiguity in their approach to digital technologies in the organisational context and the relationship with democratic participation. For others, a more optimistic view of technological transformation was evident, as a means of improving how organisations worked and related to each other, and as potential for new forms of participation.

Using the empirical data, I examined the links between the official views expressed in government documents and the conversations held with respondents, to investigate further the relative 'disappointments of e-democracy' (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 1). There is a question here about whether the 'daily conversation machinery' amongst key policy actors is constructing a new shared social reality (Keller, 2011: 41), a space in which a different discursive construction of e-democracy emerges through the interactions of policy actors.

5.2 Who are the policy actors?

In the methodology chapter I described how respondents in the fieldwork were selected. My initial aim was to talk to civil servants in different government departments and roles and at various levels of seniority on their understandings and practices around e-democracy. My reason for focusing on civil servants was that:

> The attitudes, shared meanings, resources, interactions, and decisions of insider actors matter a great deal in determining outcomes…building a better understanding of democratic engagement in public organizations requires that we do not neglect variables that can only be unearthed by qualitative insider methods.
>
> (Chadwick, 2011: 23, 35)

Once the fieldwork began, it became apparent that while some civil servants were involved in e-democratic initiatives, there were also people outside the civil service who, along with civil servants were deeply implicated in many aspects of e-democracy. Involvement could take the

form of working with civil servants in building initiatives, in discussions of the forms and platforms for initiatives, in campaigning or lobbying government to take particular directions or being consulted by government as experts.

Gradually, I realised that the policy actors driving e-democracy policy were a distinct and observable grouping of civil servants, practitioners, academics, campaigners and consultants who coalesced around issues of democratic participation and the use of digital technologies. Network is a concept which has been discussed in this thesis previously. It is also a metaphor because it is a way of visualising links and causalities between members. Actors are held in relationality with each other, that is, the connections between them shape and define outcomes. A policy network involves members working together instrumentally to achieve policy goals (Blanco et al., 2011: 301). The e-democracy network functions more as a result of the interaction of multiple heterogeneous actors and materials. New ideas, innovations, changes in behaviour, and transformations assemble, disassemble, and reassemble, producing effects and outcomes as a result (Fenwick and Edwards, 2011: 709). The e-democracy network (EDN) comes together not because all the actors are seeking common defined outcomes in e-democracy but because their involvement allows certain objects and actors to be held in relation to one another.

5.2.1 Connectivity and relationality

The key characteristic of the network was that all the actors were interested in democratic participation *and* in uses of digital technologies in government.

> I was always interested in democracy and in participation and I was interested in technology and those things became intertwined
>
> Kuldip, Civil Servant

However, they were not all equally concerned with both. Some focused more on developing democratic participation and were interested in digital technologies predominantly as a means of helping them achieve more participation. Others were more interested in the emerging technologies and their application to better government (defined variously as more efficient, cheaper, more transparent, or more open to innovation). For them, more citizen participation was a by-product of better government. It was the ways in which the actors combined and pursued these two aspects of citizen participation and use of digital technologies that made them of interest to my research.

A further commonality was in their relationship with government. In this configuration, policy actors were characterised by their work with the civil service. Some were civil servants currently working in government departments others acted as advisors on wider government policy or as project consultants for specific initiatives. They were also members of other networks such as those of academics, media companies, entrepreneurs/developers, voluntary sector groups and so on. Their membership enabled them to draw upon wider connections and knowledge. In the association with e-democracy however, the involvement of civil servants was essential in order to enact e-democracy projects.

Another characteristic of the network members was their fluidity in moving in and out of the civil service. Many of the actors were either current civil servants or had been employed as civil servants in the past. It gave them an insight into the dynamics, rules and behaviours found within the civil service, as well as the constraints that civil servants face in commissioning or implementing initiatives. There was a temporal dimension to the characteristic in that the positioning of actors within the network at any one time affected their relationships with other actors and set up different constraints and opportunities. For example one of the respondents had previously been head of a digital team in a government department and at the time of interview was a freelance consultant. As a consultant, she acknowledged she had more freedom to express her views and to choose areas of work she was interested in. Another respondent had been in a campaigning role outside government but at the time of interview was a civil servant with a role than involved telling other civil servants what they could do or not do on digital issues.

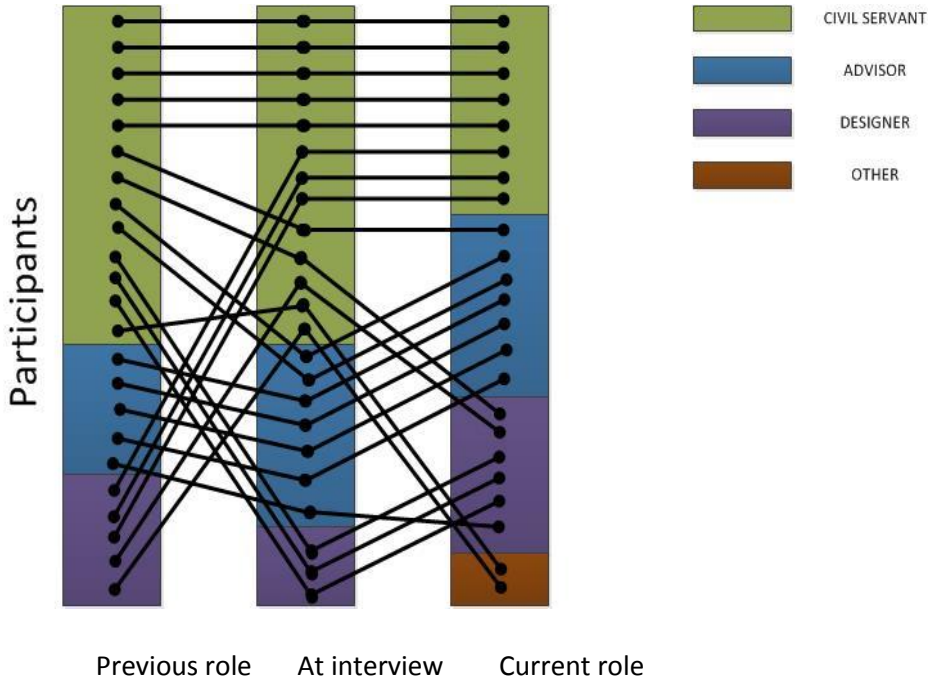

Figure 4: Movement of Respondents between roles

We can see from Figure 4 that while some people remained in the same role over time, five of the designers/consultants moved from their former role into government at the time of the interview. The majority of advisors however kept their role as advisors throughout. Five of the civil servants also continued as civil servants but five moved to become advisors or designers/consultants prior to the time of interview and a further five changed their role since the interview. In a relatively small and highly interconnected group of people, this degree of movement between different roles has effects on shared knowledge and understandings with others in the network allowing for new or different discourses to develop.

The following chapter explores in more detail the potential effects on practices generated through the operations and connections of the network. My purpose in highlighting its role here was to show that in following my research goal, I moved beyond talking to civil servants to a wider group of actors. Crucially these actors are deeply connected to civil servants in the context of e-democracy. The empirical data on their conversation and discussions is a means of making visible and analysing their views on who government engages with, why and in what manner. In mapping and describing their talk, I consider to what extent they reflect and shore up the dominant rhetoric; or if their discussions are modifying or subverting government views on citizen engagement and involvement in policy processes.

5.3 Understandings of participation and constructions of citizens

There was widespread agreement on the value of participation but agreement on its benefits masks divergent interpretations. The polyvalence of the term gives rise to contrasting beliefs and assumptions, and a number of paradoxes and contradictions (Cornwall, 2002: 1) This was reflected in frequent discussions between policy actors as well as in interviews, about what constituted democratic participation. Respondents' views were grounded in their normative understandings of what participation should be, and their interpretations of what is expected of them in particular contexts. I was interested in exploring whether the configurations used by respondents in their conversations and discussion echoed ideas disseminated through official government channels, or if they offered alternative constructions of the citizen. Who is seen to participate has effects not only in the different participatory arrangements that are developed, but also whether they are sited at local, community or national level, and in terms of what responses are expected from participants and how these are evaluated.

5.3.1 Valuing democratic participation

The policy actors were in agreement (although this varied in intensity) that finding ways to engage citizens derived from a normative base:

> It is important for government to engage people in the decision making and in the implementation of policy. If people feel decisions are being made without their input, they feel it is unfair and government depends on a minimal level of support from people.
>
> Philip Civil Servant

> To say policy is being made with the involvement of people who might be affected by it and with people who have a view about it, that is a kind of fairness which is both measurable and meaningful, which democratic governments ought to be taking notice of.
>
> Sophie, Advisor

Several of the respondents made the connection between increased citizen participation and developing trust in the wider political system.

> You need to demonstrate value and build trust. You can't consider public engagement and not look at the issue of trust.
>
> Fiona, Advisor

Increasing participation was also considered to have instrumental benefits. Many also felt that increasing participation enables new ideas to be brought into the system to improve the quality of policy:

> In addition to hearing from more people, one might hear more things from more people, different things at different times or different responses in different contexts of information supply or interaction with other people in ways that can become enriching to the policy decision.
>
> Sophie, Advisor

There were some differences between civil servants and the advisors and consultants on their assessments of the value of public participation. While these could be seen as a matter of emphasis, they also illustrate the influence of the different positions held by actors. Civil servants are subject to a web of institutional and political constraints that shape their responses to projects. Consequently they were often seen by advisors as more cautious and needing to be persuaded about the benefits of wider participation. Advisors talked about the language they used when talking to civil servants:

> I think one of the things we found very clearly is that if you talk to officials and say 'democracy' they say 'that's not my job that is the minister's job'. If you talk to them about good evidence and getting public views as evidence then they will be a lot more receptive to the message that you need to have better democratic conversations.
>
> Gill, Consultant

Citizen participation in democratic government is widely considered essential to legitimate democracy and this is reflected in the views of policy actors. None started from a position that there should be no citizen involvement but there was disagreement on the degrees and levels of democratic practice. There were divergent views on the purpose of participation, the role of citizens and how success is measured.

5.3.2 Perceptions of participation

A common perception of the public tends to imagine an external public existing in a natural state waiting to be revealed, engaged, or mobilised (Mahony, 2014) rather than different configurations that are brought into being . A number of studies have explored the recurring question of how the public is constituted and the consequent effects on the opportunities to

participate that are offered (Fenwick and McMillan, 2012: 372). In my data, I found that respondents proposed a range of different representations of who the citizen was, how they might behave and various strategies for connecting effectively with them.

How policy actors shaping digital participative opportunities conceive of and constitute the citizen in relation to government is important. Whether they are constructed as citizens, customers, users or partners influences what people are perceived to be, what they are entitled to know, to decide or to contribute (Fischer, 2006: 26). It shapes what is being offered as opportunities for democratic participation, whether as data that can used and re-used as the basis for campaigns or businesses; or as comments and opinions on existing policy options, or indeed as more discursive opportunities to formulate policy development. It also shapes expectations of what comes out of such encounters and feeds back into understandings of what happens in future initiatives.

Amongst the respondents there was quite a widely held view that being the recipient of government information was itself a form of participation although they differed in their opinions of why the government provides information. Some felt that the role of government is to provide guidance and access to information as a service to the public to enable them to make rational choices. This perspective stressed individual rights and allocated the state a minimal role. The onus of action was on citizens, whether as individuals or groups, to take the information and act upon it rather than engage in discussion with government about policy formation.

> The main thing is that we are at the centre and we are doing things that only we can do which is to give people guidance and access to the legislation and we let other people do other stuff.
>
> Anna, Civil Servant

Some respondents expressed the view that citizens needed the government to provide information because the public lacked knowledge of how policy was developed and implemented and that lack of information inhibited their ability to participate effectively in policy making. One of the respondents suggested that while participants might express strong feelings of outrage or disagreement, they were not able to convert their feelings into effective contributions to the policy process:

> We have individuals and a lot of fairly uninformed individuals who haven't been taught about policy issues and don't know how to argue the case. They know they

> feel something but they don't have the knowledge or the skills, or the training to argue it.
>
> Fiona, Advisor

In a Teacamp discussion, opinions were expressed that people did not expect their views to be heard or taken into account. Their views articulated a concern that the public did not trust the government and was increasingly disengaged from it. Various reasons were suggested for the situation, often it was seen as a lack of trust from citizens that they would be listened to or that their participation would lead to discernible outcomes. There was also some interplay with the view exemplified by Nicola that most people were too busy with their own concerns:

> The big thing is how do you work with the community to get them to participate but you have earn the right to ask them. They are busy doing other things in their lives
>
> Nicola, Civil Servant

Other interviewees were keen to establish a perspective on information provision, not as an end in itself but as a precursor to other forms of participation.

> You can't have engagement without the information. You can't really use the information in the best possible way without being able to contextualise it.
>
> Richard, Civil Servant

> The purists would say that just providing information isn't participation or engagement, you need to be moving up the ladder towards empowerment. I think that while providing information is not participation or engagement or whatever term you want to use, it is a fundamental foundation of everything else that needs to happen.
>
> Joanna, Advisor

The idea of the citizen as someone who requires information or data as a tool to enable them to pursue further engagement with government is also a strand of the open data agenda and this was reflected in the way some respondents talked about open data not only as a means of improving efficiency and accountability but also as an opportunity to increase public participation in what happens in government::

> It was pretty obvious to me that it was possible to build the tools that would be of direct benefit to the public, particularly around tools that would help people who didn't consider themselves to know anything at all about how democracy worked.
>
> Kelly, Advisor

> When it's all out there lots of people will be able to have a look and take a view about whether the evidence supports the policy in the way suggested. That's when politics gets interesting.
>
> Tina, Advisor

This merges with the perception of the citizen as a monitor of government activities, prepared to challenge government on financial probity or efficiency. It is an understanding of participation that has developed with the transparency and accountability agenda in government. It became associated with open data and Eric Pickles invocation of 'armchair auditors' (Butler, 2011):

> I really want there to be some awesome data on the contracts that the government signs essentially so that third parties, whether that is the public or lobbyists or campaign groups can just work out what the hell the government is doing.
>
> Kelly, Advisor

Open data as a means of structuring practice is explored in the next chapter but here I am concerned with how ideas and values associated with transparency and accountability can become subsumed into representations of the citizen. The idea of the citizen performing necessary checks upon government activities preceded open data. It was a significant aspect of the long running campaign for Freedom of Information (FoI) which came into force in 2005. With the campaign for FoI as with open data, the view that citizens had a right to know what government was doing was also, unsurprisingly, reflected in the views of the interviewees:

My view on government departments is that they are not transparent enough. We don't think enough about our customers, we don't think enough about our accessibility to the outside world. We don't make enough effort to make ourselves available.

Mohammed, Civil Servant

The civil servants in the study were more accepting, or perhaps more pragmatic in defending the government's position that citizens wanted data, and wanted to monitor government

performance and spending. Implicitly in most cases, but in others explicitly, they equated the right to data about government with an improvement in citizens' potential to participate. Other respondents took issue with this, a number of the advisors and practitioners saw the focus on releasing data as damaging, diverting civil servants and citizens from other forms of participation and campaigning:

> We know it's going to be useful to a degree and it's going to be completely redundant to most people. Most people will never use open data.
>
> Fiona, Advisor

In these discussions about the purpose of democratic participation, it can be seen that the actors held different and sometimes conflicting views. Some thought that citizens should be empowered to make choices in their own communities. Others wanted to citizens to challenge government, through the data, and hold it accountable for its actions. A much smaller group saw participation as a means of developing and changing policies. The influence of discourses about modernising government through increased efficiency or better delivery of services is apparent. So too is the discourse on transparency of government, in particular through the discussions on open data. Although such discourses shape the actors' views of reality, the inherent contradictions and flaws in the discourses allow for alternative interpretations of democratic participation to be proposed. In the highly inter-connected world of e-democracy new arguments and uses of technology are easily exchanged and create opportunities for discursive challenges to the dominant discourses.

5.3.3 Citizens under construction

There were tensions between depictions of citizens as democratic participants in policy making or as customers who want to make choices about goods and services. If citizens are viewed primarily as consumers of government services, then their participation may be configured as demanding more services, or more resources, or to provide feedback on the way services are currently delivered. Many of the respondents subscribed to this view of participation, derived from the modernisation discourse:

> Well we see it affecting many other sectors, you know, new product development, rapid iteration, the way Apple develops products. So that learn from your customers, but don't always believe what your customers say…that's a perfectly accepted business process.
>
> Nicola, Civil Servant

> We are also not good at feedback. We should ask people 'how did you rate this experience?' It's nothing new, just getting more into an Amazon model of public service.
>
> Fiona, Advisor

The idea of the citizen as a customer/consumer was sometimes combined with a belief that efforts to increase citizen participation were most appropriate at the local level. Several interviewees understood effective participation as something that happened more easily at the local rather than the national level. Efforts to enhance participation were about positioning citizens in particular political and policy arenas. The notion of a local community was one that was powerful in this context:

> In some ways local government has more opportunities; if you look at the sector they are consulting a lot more, they are running direct services, so arguably they can take advantage of the immediacy that social media gives them in terms of consultation and changing services.
>
> Anna, Civil Servant

Many of the participation initiatives were defined as opportunities to comment on provision of services, to enable government to understand and if possible meet individual and community needs more closely. Facilitating good participation was seen as tailoring participative opportunities to be as close to people's daily concerns as possible. For some this was not just at the level of local government but to a hyper-local level of neighbourhoods and communities:

> I think the challenge for DCLG is keeping it going and actually working out what people really care about is hyper-local , close to their ward and their street. That is where the attention has to be.
>
> Tina, Advisor

In placing the emphasis on local levels of governance, policy actors were able to distance participation from the national arena to another setting. While it seems apparent that opportunities to directly engage can be developed, if not more easily, then more visibly when citizens are closer to those who are making decision on their behalf, this does not answer the question about how citizen engage with policies that are formulated at the national level, or to go beyond opinions about service provision, and contribute to strategic choices.

Although this focus on the citizen as a customer and/or local was stressed by some of the respondents, it was by no means accepted by all of them. Some argued against this understanding of participation. One person suggested that asking people for feedback on services was essentially tokenistic; it was a way of avoiding more meaningful participation. Another acknowledged that government services were important to people and they wanted their voices heard about their efficiency and effectiveness but they also wanted other forms of participation and in particular they wanted ways of being involved in decision making and strategic choices.

A competing although subservient discourse was in perceiving citizens as partners in governance, working with officials to make plans or policies or develop strategies for public action (Fung, 2006: 12). The idea of collaboration or co-governance was rarely discussed. Even though the interviews were set up on the basis that I wanted to speak about online public participation, I found it striking that some of the transcribed interviews showed relatively few references to citizen involvement. Respondents often talked instead about audiences inside government (politicians, other departments, teams within departments or the centre) and about partners in business, academia or campaigners. When citizen participation was discussed, it was most frequently in the form of the previous incantations discussed above rather than as partners. A small minority of the respondents did raise the idea of collaboration but often tentatively or in the context of what e-democracy could become rather than the current situation.

For example, one civil servant talked about a report on Swedish e-government as an ideal scenario:

> There is a four box diagram …One of the top boxes was 'we get brilliant' and the other top box was 'We get incredibly collaborative, we use all the technology in the best way, in these communities, we are making policy together
>
> Nicola Civil Servant

A consultant provided an example of engagement at a local level that she saw as offering a more collaborative approach by being interactive and ongoing:

> In London, they are developing an online panel that have their own chats and their own communities but are also used as a research community. I wonder if that might become a national thing in future. They advise the Mayor on things. It is a combination of things that the GLA (Greater London Authority) wants to find out from Londoners and also the things that Londoners talk about that can bubble up into issues that GLA takes on board
>
> Stephanie, Consultant

One of the civil servants was sceptical that government was really willing to embrace more radical models of participative and collaborative involvement.

> I mean there is a power shift and it will be interesting to see how much power politicians truly wish to hand over because if you are developing policy and really want early engagement, you will get views you don't like. And those views can be used, if they are published, through the process of a bill, so how willing will people be to embrace it. They have said they are and we are being encouraged to do it but it hasn't been tested.
>
> Patrick, Civil servant

Another senior civil servant related how he had presented ministers in his department with a series of options for public participation in a specific policy area, one that had been widely promoted as an arena for greater public involvement. The ideas he offered ranged from collaborative wiki's to stakeholder discussions and when I asked how these were received, he laughed and said they did not go for the radical options.

5.3.4 Measuring success

Civil servants placed more emphasis on the instrumental benefits of participation, they wanted to be able to determine that putting effort and resources into participatory initiatives brought about defined outcomes. Sometimes the outcomes were policy goals but they could also be about improving efficiency or transparency of departments or about demonstrating (to politicians) that civil servants had the creativity or capacity to manage big digital projects. For different groups of people and in different contexts, the value of participatory exercises can mean very different things although this may not be immediately apparent.

In evaluating the success or otherwise of attempts to engage citizens, the interviewees did not on the whole attempt to measure the impact of the initiative on policy actions or decisions, rather they sought to unravel what makes an initiative a good endeavour, one that might be repeated or what hadn't worked and why. Yet, to analyse what lies behind value judgements of what makes for 'good participation', necessitates a question about what respondents saw as the purpose of government sponsored public participation. What are the benefits and why would they spend scarce resources on commissioning participatory initiatives at all?

The focus is on how government insiders evaluated participation, and in particular digital participation. The question of what constituted successful participation was often as much about the effects of participation inside government as about the external impacts:

> Most policy makers aren't really thinking about the issue of the public in governance terms, they are not thinking about how their organisation makes decisions. What they think about is 'how do I get the public's view into a submission that is going to the minister or director general or whoever?'
>
> Joanna, Advisor

For some respondents the idea that participation was about numbers was based on a pragmatic belief that politicians often equated legitimacy with large numbers. There was an implicit link with the model of representative democracy. One of the advisors suggested that this often what shaped choices within government:

> One of the other things that is a block is the sense that if we are not doing it in a purist way which is engaging the maximum amount of people in the maximum amount of ways, we are not doing it properly, we are going to get criticised so why do it all, or we just can't do it with the resources we've got. That's the fear that some in government might have.
>
> Joanna, Advisor

For others, the value attached to numbers had been internalised:

> It is scale that is a problem quite often for policy makers. They feel some of the samples are quite small. It is always a bit of a trade off because the more people you get taking part, perhaps the more statistically relevant, or the more weight that data has but it gets more difficult to evaluate it because of the volume.
>
> Kuldip, Civil Servant

Digital methods were valued by some because of their ability to increase numbers and reach:

> I really jumped at the chance to help out on 'Your Freedom' consultation. It was crazy, successful and many departments will have scars on their backs as a result. One of the things was the massive level of reply, it was brilliant, I think it was 79,000 comments, 1000s of ideas, 100,000s of page views
>
> Nicola, Civil Servant

Despite the attraction of large numbers, it was noticeable that in asking what respondents thought of as 'good' participation that ideas of discussion, deliberation and of spending time on complex and contested issues came to the fore, rather than when asked about 'successful' participation, when the focus was on resources and numbers. One of the civil servants spoke about the role of moderation in designing initiatives to enable people of very different views to contribute:

> We started off with a very structured set of questions which people responded to, and then for the second round we invited a sample of those to take part in a group discussion with the chair. We used three questions that they were given beforehand to think about and the discussion was moderated. So there are ways to design around these problems.
>
> Kuldip, Civil Servant

Another interviewee proposed a different approach to participation that was more ongoing rather than focused on particular policy problems or stages.

> I am increasingly thinking of accountability loops and different types of participation at different levels and different parts of the organisation…Experts go away and strut their stuff, do their thing but then you bring the public back in to ask 'why did you make the decision in that way, when we thought it should be that'? So what you do is you begin to get the politicians looking at what the public are thinking, the public learn how decision making works and change their view. You begin to set up a conversation about decisions that allows learning on both sides.
>
> Joanna, Advisor

A similar comment was made by one of the civil servants when she reflected on what she would like to see happen:

> We need to make sure we take the community with us and have an ongoing conversation. At times there will be a formal consultation and at other times

> engagement for the sake of – 'we'd like to play you into this because you expressed an interest or knowledge about this'. Next time, we would put you back out – in a good way – because it's not your subject matter. It is that kind of marshalling, that kind of stakeholder management in line with other skills that need to be brought in to structure the engagement. I really feel that is what we have to learn and practice over the next few years.
>
> Nicola, Civil servant

These examples provide insights into both the differences and similarities within this group of government insiders as they tried to evaluate participation. Some argued that e-democracy facilitates larger numbers of citizens to take part in order to demonstrate a representative opinion. Others suggested that more digital tools can be used to enable in depth participation to solve complex problems. Policy making has been described as 'collective puzzlement on society's behalf' (Hall, 1993) and many of policy actors sought to enrol citizens into attempts at collective resolution in a more discursive, iterative manner. The tension between these two approaches reflects a wider tension between representative and participatory democracy, between approaches based on aggregation of interests or those using deliberation and dialogue. In their deliberations, the policy actors grappled with the different problematisations around democratic participation reflecting how the struggle for meaning is constantly being contested. Many of the policy actors were arguing not for one thing or another but for a multi-stranded, iterative and situationally specific set of approaches to achieve a more consequential interaction between citizens and government.

5.4 The properties and potential of digital technologies

Much of the academic discussion about democratic participation runs on parallel but separate lines to the discussions about uses of Web technologies in government (for example Newman et al., 2004, Hay and Stoker, 2009, Warren, 2009). In part this is because most analysis about digital technologies in government has focused on e-government rather than e-democracy. When ideas about Web technologies and democratic participation are brought together, there is a danger that the discussion over states the technical aspects to policy problems, rather than exploring whether e-democracy tools are being used as a catalyst for wider democratic change (Prachett, 2007: 2). In this section, data is analysed to examine how respondents perceive the interaction of Web technologies with democratic participation. Do they comprehend the digital innovations as updating existing practices, or as more fundamentally upsetting current understandings of what public participation consists of and its purpose?

It was not surprising that in a group of predominantly digital enthusiasts, technology was seen as a way to solve problems:

> We are hugely passionate about good digital government here and that is what I am about. I see it very much as invigorating the relationship between citizens and certainly government and maybe the political process overall.
>
> Kuldip, Civil Servant

The same respondent saw the application of digital tools as a resource-efficient means of overcoming cost and time constraints; essentially as an improved version of what had previously been undertaken offline:

> Policy teams are saying we can't afford the resources, the time the money to run big citizen juries exercises but we can ask the Twittersphere or we can ask people to comment on this draft…Digital is there as a quick effective, fairly low cost way of finding data, getting information and insight.

Others were resistant to the idea that e-democracy was a separate activity:

> I think we are moving away, and I'm glad we are, from a period when people thought there was this thing called digital engagement and another thing called engagement. I think what we are moving towards is a mainstreaming of traditional experience so much that actually people's online and offline political activities are pretty much merged.
>
> Gill, Consultant

In the discussions, I found that the term 'e-democracy' had little meaning for most of the respondents. If I used the term, they would respond by challenging or qualifying the use of term and it was rarely initiated by them. Several respondents reacted, as illustrated above, in not wanting participation online to be separated from offline participation. Some actors nevertheless saw the introduction of digital tools and platforms as bringing some distinctive and different opportunities to the participative table:

> If you are in a face to face conversation obviously the to and fro interactivity is very rich but in almost any form of mass communication up until now, you sent out a message, which is received and then there is either a long gap or no expectation of anything coming back. In the asynchronous or synchronous interactivity there is a capacity for network building.
>
> Sophie, Advisor

> The question is 'how can we make the policy process more transparent and open? And how can we engage community groups out there, across the country much more actively in what we are doing? We are interested in Twitter, blogging and online on-going dialogue which would be not just us to them but to each other, we want to look at how we can facilitate that.
>
> Mohammad, Civil Servant

5.4.1 Participation through social media

The use of social media also allowed officials to listen to what people are saying about their policies. On one hand listening seems a passive form of engagement, or even in a slightly more sinister fashion, a form of surveillance; but from another point of view the opportunities afforded through social media monitoring offer a different perspective on the participative relationship; it becomes more ongoing and conversational rather than advancing defined and one-off spaces for comment:

> You have to personally engage, to listen to people, the key part of consultation is listening. It is a vital part of the exercise. And not just listening to direct conversations, also monitoring social media, being able to tap into the wider social media buzz around the topic. Trying to distil that and come up with a set of action points that is based on what you have received so you can tie them back.
>
> Fiona, Advisor

> They should all be listening to and probably engaging with the online communities that are their audience, year in, year out, whether they have a formal consultation or not. By the time you need a formal thought from that audience, they already know you as Joe Bloggs from the team who has been chatting on the forum with us for 6 months,
>
> Kate, Civil Servant

The understanding of what participation meant for this interviewee was not just the ability to hear what people were saying but significantly she also saw the public's contributions develop iteratively and in interaction with others, so that participants could improve their grasp of the issues, as well as comprehend potential implications and difficulties of implementation. But it was not evident whether she had fully considered the asymmetrical power relations involved. However much policy makers listen to what people say and use it to improve policy, they still control the levers of power in that they define and enact policies.

A number of respondents emphasised that using a range of digital channels allowed for a more sophisticated mix of participation opportunities. Engaging with citizens through social media offers different experiences for the participants and policy officials, and potentially enriches the policy discussion in ways that were not widely possible before:

> The Facebook audience isn't so much in the business world, the skills world. But that can be a way of reaching less of a media/stakeholder type of audience, more of a direct customer…the stories themselves probably just gave them the priorities and the strength of feeling there was out there. They could use that to weigh against the more reasoned analytical stuff they got from stakeholders. They are often telling the same stories and same issues but in a different way.
>
> Stephanie, Consultant

> You know Facebook is the right channel for that because it is an emotional, concerning thing. We ask people 'how has adoption changed your life?' For good or bad' or asking for stories to give evidence about things. You get some really heartfelt stuff posted on Facebook but you wouldn't ask a blanket question on business agenda, on investment in growth.
>
> Nicola, Civil Servant

This suggests that social media offers opportunities for a more story-based and emotional contribution to developing policy. Participants can see and can comment on what other people have written offering opportunities for discussion to develop. This might give policy makers an insight into why people have a view on policies:

> If you don't know why people are for or against it, where do you pitch the argument? There is no point in talking about road pricing as a means of saving the planet if most people don't want it because it affects their pocket. They get the climate change argument but actually they can't afford to pay a road toll every day. Digital lets you ask the why. It tells you a lot more than 50 percent want this and 40 percent want that.
>
> Fiona, Advisor

5.4.2 Unforeseen effects of digital technologies within government

A further aspect of digital technologies raised in different ways by interviewees related to the unintended impacts of using digital technologies on internal cultures within the civil service. There were risks and anxieties expressed about how social media in particular could make individual civil servants feel vulnerable:

> So people are very nervous because if you make a mistake on Twitter, it's there unfortunately. There was a confidence building exercise which was why the digital team embed and sit with people, that helps. They say 'what do I do now? What do I say to this?' and then they learn and they are fine.
>
> Patrick, Civil servant

And there was quite a lot of discussion about rules and guidance for civil servants in their use of social media:

> We first wrote the social media guidance for government where… it was quite long about 70 pages… in about 2007. It was very much a how to because when we said 'go do it', people said, how? People wanted a bit of unpacking, so we unpacked it, it was comfort.
>
> Nicola, civil servant

But it was also noted that as well as opening up opportunities externally, the use of digital technologies within organisations could democratise internal structures:

> It (The Red Tape Challenge) was really quite fascinating because it was about changing the whole culture of how you engage in the policy process and how you use digital media.
>
> Patrick, Civil Servant

> It (social media) has changed and empowered individual civil servants, those who are able to operate more politically (with a small p not a large p) and are able to navigate and create slightly more space for themselves.
>
> Joanna, Advisor

Some writers argue that as technologies are enacted in organisations, they tend to reinforce existing power structures (Fountain, 2009: 4) but others have concurred with the respondents' view that digital technologies have the potential to internally democratise government through flatter hierarchical structures, more creative employees and the easier

and more dense networking of officials and citizens (Chadwick, 2003: 451) the implications of which may have unforeseen effects on wider democratic understandings and practices. The example of open policy making illustrates how the concept was discursively constructed by some respondents as an emerging space for officials to interact differently with citizens.

5.4.3 Open Policy Making

Open Policy Making (OPM) was an initiative developed by the Coalition Government and presented by them as a radical alternative to traditional means of making policy using digital technologies. There is a discursive ambiguity about open policy making that became apparent in talking to respondents. It can be seen as opening up of government to citizen contributions but it can also be seen as an instrument to reform the civil service and reduce their control of the policy process. Other elements of government would see OPM as more of a digital updating of traditional stakeholder engagement processes, inviting contributions from businesses or academics or other interest groups. Several interviewees were closely involved in working with the Cabinet Office in developing case studies, discussions and tools. The Teacamp group also had a strong and active interest in developing OPM. For some, this new space was a means of readjusting boundaries between state and citizen, allowing for new possibilities.

> We thought, 'let's be a little radical here and when you think of engaging with government, it doesn't just mean engagement *done* by government, engagement isn't just run by government, where does the interface lie.
>
> Fiona, Advisor

There was tension between the opportunities opened up by the new uses of technology and the organisational rules that sought to manage the process:

> It is difficult to create from the centre the type of organisational change that you really need if they are serious about this. Just because you put a toolkit in, and a participation checklist – we all know how those things go.
>
> Gill, Consultant

The respondent, although aware of the organisational challenges and the attitudes that tend to reinforce pre-existing patterns of working and divisions, was nevertheless hopeful that the combination of digital technologies and complex social interactions might allow for new creative opportunities:

> That kind of way of working and the dissolution of boundaries between places is mirrored by the ways of working that dissolve boundaries between inside and outside organisations. What we are explicitly trying to create with the Open Policy Making stuff is a space in the middle between inside and outside … Those kinds of spaces in between is where all the exciting stuff is going to happen. It is the dissolving and the softening of boundaries that is creating that space in the middle.
>
> Gill, Consultant

Another interviewee pondered whether the ongoing nature of another crowdsourcing site offered an example of a deeper form of engagement amongst participating citizens:

> I think the Red Tape Challenge is significant, not just because of its scale but because of its longevity... It is really interesting, back to the (idea of) structured engagement. The environment challenge closed long ago but there is still debate about it. People are still contributing there is still an engaged group.
>
> Nicola, Civil servant

These responses suggest a subtly different discursive construction of OPM from the government presentation. Within the e-democracy network, OPM was seen as an opportunity, a new space that they could use to advance democratic participation beyond what the government had envisaged. Many of the respondents were critical of incumbent forms of participation such as consultation which seek to control contributions by simplifying and rationalising them through institutionalised channels (Blaug, 2002: 105). They wanted to create new spaces using digital technologies to challenge existing ideas about who participates and how they take part. The policy actors acknowledged that few concrete examples of open policy making existed but many felt it offers a potential site for transformation and challenge to existing understandings.

5.5 Discursive spaces

Discourses of participation are full of spatial metaphors, whether of 'opening up', 'widening' and 'broadening' opportunities for citizen engagement, or of 'deepening' democratic practice (Cornwall, 2002: 1) and this is also true for e-democracy. As Coleman notes "from the earliest days of the Internet, much writing has been devoted to its potential as a space for public deliberation" (in Fischer and Gottweiss, 2012: 161). Political spaces imply possibilities for opening up or being occupied, space in this understanding is also about power, and who can manage the space. Changes take place, producing tensions and ambiguity about authority and governance. This was reflected in many of the comments from respondents; they talked

about going into other people's space online or working around the edges in order to open up new opportunities.

Government organisations are entities and spaces within which policy actors interact in their conceptualisation and enactment of e-democracy. Institutional approaches to understanding organisations focus more on the structures and arrangements of organisations while the more social constructionist approach used here emphasises the discursive construction of meanings, identities and knowledge (Fischer, 2006: 25). Not everything is reducible to discourse however, discourse neither just constructs 'reality' nor simply functions as its mirroring effect (Iedema, 2007: 938, 940). Actors engage with the semiotic, material and contingent character of social–organizational processes. Meaning and materiality are co-constituted; they shape and define each other.

There were several instances of how the physicality of organisations influenced respondents' sense of self and place. Sarah talked about how observing a differences in office design made her want to change the arrangements in government departments to improve communication and innovation:

> They redesigned the organisational structure of the Telegraph from the ground up. What they ended up with was this huge room – about the size of a football pitch and double height. In the centre of this big room was a big round table and going off that like spokes of a wheel you have UK news, sports news, foreign news and you have your journalists next to digital people and your sub editors all on the spokes. In every meeting they all go into the middle. And you have a huge wall of screens, you have the Website, BBC, CNN, it was such an inspirational thing. I kept going back to this project and saying this is what we need inside Government.
>
> Sarah, Civil Servant

Paul suggested that some of the problems he had found in implementing changes to a website were in part due to the separation between different working groups:

> It is geographical. Communications sit up on the seventh floor. Everyone else is not there. It might be a bit of laziness or not wanting to pick up the phone to someone perhaps you haven't met. Perhaps it is just not ingrained in the way of working if you are a policy official to think that when you are planning or designing the policy, how will this be communicated.
>
> Paul, Civil Servant

A further consideration of place as an element of social construction was apparent in many of the 'Teacamp' meetings that I observed. By holding the meeting in a café in central London, everyone attending the meeting had travelled from their place of work. People were taken out of their immediate working environment and this was often commented upon, in terms of the difficulty of extracting themselves from the office, or views about public transport or the immediate surroundings of the café, drinks, cake, noise, finding enough chairs and so on. Bringing people together from diverse places was an event it had a social character (particularly as it was usually followed by an invitation to the pub). As with Sarah's experience of the Telegraph seating design, Teacamp engendered a positive sense of community and sharing knowledge, it configured space as *active*, simultaneously socially producing and socially produced (Leonard, 2012: 335).

Organisations frame and configure identities of those who work in them and for them as well as constructing participant identities as discussed earlier. For some, their professional identity as civil servants influenced their behaviours and their understandings of how they were viewed. Some were concerned about how online engagement would fit with traditional expectations of behaviour for civil servants such as impartiality and political neutrality. People talked about avoiding risk and protecting ministers. There was a sense of treading carefully and holding back from some forms of engagement.

> It is a lot of feeling, sensing… and because it is being done so publicly, the presumption about tweeting everything, or blog about the process and I think for some of the traditional civil servants…That someone might call you later on.
>
> Nicola, Civil servant

A different sort of identity was provided by some of the respondents who defined themselves as rule breakers and innovators rather than obedient civil servants. Sarah, for example perceived her senior managers as people who didn't understand the opportunities of digital technologies.

> My modus operandi was always never to tell them what we were doing, but just get on with it. That old maxim, it's easier to ask for forgiveness than ask for permission.
>
> Sarah, Civil servant

Interwoven with identities were the stories and narratives that respondents constructed about their relationships with organisations. There were three stories in particular that were frequently repeated. One was the story of innovation (including rule breaking). This was

about pushing the boundaries, sometimes in technology but more often the cultural boundaries of the organisation. People spoke of 'getting senior buy-in and senior sponsorship' and of persuading staff that digital engagement would improve their work.

The second story people told was about the lack of confidence and technical skills in the civil service:

> We tried to recruit pioneers or champions within the department who could do things, who could use the tools and start to show examples of how it might work. It was quite experimental. It was new to a lot of people and we had to overcome a lot of the barriers, which I think are sadly still there in many places.
>
> Stephanie, consultant

> I suppose because we are working in this field day in, day out, it all seems incredibly obvious to us but I was quite surprised by how little understood some of the really basic concepts actually are. It is by taking people right back to the basics. I think it is the danger for the digital community … because it is so obvious to us what we are talking about.
>
> Thomas, Civil Servant

This was a narrative that was full of frustration at the slow pace of change even though there was also sympathy for officials who saw the acquisition of digital skills as a burdensome addition to their current jobs.

This connected to the third narrative, the story of cuts in staff, resources and budgets and the difficulties that caused. There were different emphases in the way the story was told. Some focused on how digital enabled greater efficiencies so that more could be done for less, feeding into the modernisation discourse. Others suggested that the consequences of cuts on resources and how organisations functioned was reducing the effectiveness of what governments can achieve.

> It's a case of balancing the resources, the shrinking resources available to him against what Ministers want – it's a difficult juggling act.
>
> Rosie, Civil Servant

For many, the outcome of reduced budgets meant that opportunities for experimenting with new designs or innovation in developing online forms of democratic participation were given a lower priority:

> There's now just less money which makes things more difficult too. And that goes one of two ways. There are a few councils who are being very innovative and understanding that because there is less money they have to do things differently. It means engaging with their communities in a very different way. There are many who are just putting up the barricades and doing what they can.
>
> Joanna, Advisor

The discussions reveal how policy actors' views on e-democracy have to compete with powerful organizational discourses, such as reducing costs and streamlining administrative procedures to prioritise service delivery. It shows how the actors tried to position themselves in relation to the resulting ambiguity. Through their stories, they were engaged in finding or establishing connections, re-imagining activities and forging individual and collective identities that also shape participation opportunities.

5.6 Discussion and conclusions

I set out to discover at the beginning of the chapter what this group of people, who are deeply involved in influencing and working with government in providing digital innovation and participatory opportunities talk about. What were their perceptions and hopes? How were relationships with government managed? I sought to explore whether the discussions were maintaining or challenging the dominant government discourses that structure government relationships with citizens. Analysis of their talk highlights some key insights into differences and similarities within the group and how these inform the prevailing discourses on citizen involvement.

In this chapter, the interplay between discourses and networks becomes apparent. It is impossible to analyse what was said without becoming aware of the many connections between respondents and the effects of those connections on what was said. The network of policy actors involved in e-democracy brings in both human and non-human actors although in this chapter, the focus was on human actors' talk. Their role in developing and implementing policy links to discussions about governance beyond the state (Swyngedouw, 2005: 1992) Their interactions and relationships generate collaborative solutions and mobilisation of innovations. It enables the circulation of ideas but also adds legitimation to policy statements, shaping what counts as policy and opening up or limiting possibilities.

It was evident that those interviewed or observed did not have an agreed concept of the citizen. There were multiple interpretations and configurations, and these were contingent upon context and opportunities. It is unsurprising that government discourses on

modernisation and transparency were incorporated into many people's understandings; as government insiders they are required to implement government policy and are both subject to the dominant discourses and in turn articulate them to others. Despite this, many of the respondents found aspects of the dominant discourses problematical and were searching for alternative understandings of the citizen that would allow for more collaborative and discursive policy orientated forms of participation.

The role of digital technologies in participation was emphasised by interviewees. There was disagreement between those who thought that digital methods were helpful in scaling up numbers, increasing transparency and being more cost efficient in reaching people but essentially updating offline participatory methods and others who argued that the properties of digital were potentially changing the nature of participation, increasing the possibilities of dialogical networking between government and citizens, between citizens and within government. The digital properties were significant but this was not predominantly a technologically deterministic argument it was more that use of digital technologies can have unforeseen consequences and opens up new opportunities, one example being that of open policy making.

Taken together, the discursive patterns in respondents' talk show a strong relationship with current government discourses on participation and the extent to which their understandings are shaped through the prism of modernism and transparency. We can see the continuing influences of the dominant discourses on the role of the citizen in government. Modernisation focuses on reducing costs, improving efficiency and delivering services to citizens. Transparency and open data provides an updated twist to these concerns, by offering the citizen not only the means to audit government spending but the potential to reuse and investigate government data to develop new policy opportunities. Ideas about the citizen as a consumer most closely feed into these discourses.

Respondents' evaluations of participatory initiative and what they thought worked or failed to work exposes some important insights into understandings of what is being evaluated. Conversations revealed that e-democracy initiatives might work for *policy actors* instead of for citizens. The outcomes achieved in e-democracy projects were evaluated according to measures such as cost, numbers taking part or in demonstrating government commitment rather than in altering policy processes or facilitating public involvement in decision making. If seen as successful, e-democracy initiatives enhanced reputations or influence within government.

In exploring the talk of policy actors, we begin to develop our understanding of the place of talk in cementing established perceptions but also in bringing about change. Talk is shaped by dominant discourses and but also draws in other elements that shape the communicative interaction between actors. Over time there is a dialectical interaction between policy actors creating a struggle for meaning. The differences that emerged indicate there are other conceptualisations of democratic participation striving to be heard. This is a group of people who are, on the whole, excited by the potential of digital technologies to enrich participation. They are not utopians who prophecy internet based visions of digital democracy (Loader and Mercea, 2011: 757) but neither do they see the technologies as having no effects, as the political system incorporates and controls them. Rather, they talk about the changes to the understanding of what participation means and the effects that participation has over time. They express a developing sense that the affordances of digital and particularly social media could allow for what Coleman has described as a more dialogical democracy (Coleman and Firmstone, 2014: 842), in which citizens are not so much spoken for or to but more with. The outcomes as respondents acknowledge, are indeterminate and contingent on many other internal and external elements. Hegemonic discourses on what constitutes citizen participation and the narratives, analyses and action plans that emerge as a result are subject to challenge by this diffuse but highly connected set of actors who offer up ideas of e-democracy as something rather different, more uncertain, and less easily controlled. The degree to which the policy actors influence discursive change and the implications in terms of effects on practices are examined in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: **Talk to practice: the performance of e-democracy**

6.1 Introduction

CitizenSpace, as part of UK Online, was an early e-democracy initiative offering citizens the promise of an interactive relationship with government. It was established in 2001 as a successor to the Downing Street Website and was initially popular, with 35,000 registered users in the first six months (Coleman, 2002: 16). The discussion forum suggested a Habermasian idea of the public sphere in which citizens deliberated on topics before coming to considered decisions (Wright, 2006a: 241). In practice, CitizenSpace encountered problems from the outset. The software was designed and run by an external independent company. Users were invited to 'Have your say on government policy and share your views with other users by taking part in our online discussion groups'(Coleman, 2002: 17). The implicit understanding was that government would listen and respond. In addition, the Cabinet Office outsourced moderation of the site to an external organisation who conducted a silent policy of moderation, rather than interacting with citizens about comments. This led to onsite comments amongst users about conspiracies and possible surveillance. Analysis of postings by the Hansard Society as part of a wider evaluation of UK government e-consultations found that the site became dominated by a small number of high posting participants. The discussions became outlets for ill-informed opinion, prejudice and abuse, leading to subsequent closure of the project (Coleman, 2002: 17).

The story illustrates how the initial aims were undermined in the execution of the project, something that became further exaggerated as the project unfolded. In the 'doing' of the innovation, the innovation itself was transformed and ultimately it failed to deliver its initial promise. In particular, the practices of innovation were shaped by wider processes of modernisation which had led to an outsourcing of expertise. The underlying conceptualisations of citizen interaction with government shaped software design, and generated pathways of use that were at variance with citizen expectations. Disappointed expectations led to participants responding negatively and eventually voting with their feet. The failure of informed engagement in this case, added to existing organisational anxieties about the democratic value of using digital technologies and influenced the shape of future projects. The government subsequently discontinued large scale discussion forums and concentrated instead on smaller scale policy linked forums (Wright, 2006a: 242).

Policies are process *and* product, intention *and* enactment. In analysing e-democracy practices, they cannot be separated from discourses on democracy, consumerism or administrative reform. Practices are never just about the 'doing' (Hajer and Laws, 2006: 412). Action is situated in the historical and social context of situations, relationships and tacit assumptions that are interwoven with the technologies, structures and codified procedures of government organisations. The e-democracy discourse incorporates narratives, behaviours and conceptualisations about democratic participation and about digital opportunities that are manifested in social relationships, resource allocations, and organisational priorities that are particular to e-democracy (Chadwick, 2011: 35). At the same time, e-democracy also draws upon more dominant discourses such as the modernisation of government which adapt ideas of e-democracy, absorbing them into the modernisation discourse embedding them in the institutional processes. Practices derive from and are constituted by texts such as policy guidance, ministerial speeches or white papers. These generate practices such as procurement procedures, legal advice, ministerial briefings, partnership working and means of evaluation.

I have argued that discourses shape practices and there is also the corollary that practices change in the enacting of them, through their performance as those implementing practices modify, adapt and amend. The empirical data undertaken for my thesis offers an opportunity to make visible some of these hidden processes; the embedded interdependencies, interactions and activities that shape and influence e-democratic practices. The respondents in the study spoke about their own experiences and understandings, the barriers they came up against and the opportunities they were able to use to pursue their goals. Through the participant observation; conversations and non-verbal behaviours between actors were studied for a fuller insight into the contexts within which e-democracy is enacted.

This chapter builds on the previous chapters by using the empirical data to show how the practices of e-democracy are shaped by discourses of modernisation and transparency and also by discursive conflicts and negotiations of actors working in the field. The actors who have to make policies work are constantly interpreting, adapting, and improvising as they try to make sense of a complex and unstable landscape. Practices therefore are always in the process of change, contingency and undecidability. The interplays between discourse, actors and processes and the outcomes produced are explored through the data, by examining the organisational environment of government, the use of digital technologies and the web of relationships between actors which mediate and alter practices in micro-contexts.

The first part of this chapter is concerned with examining government organisations and the influence of structures, processes, relationships, interactions and capacities on actions and behaviours. The empirical data maps how shifting ideological concerns about reform of government administration has informed and affected what civil servants do. The overlapping logics and tensions of different models of organisation have influenced how policy is shaped and implemented. The creation of the Government Digital Service (GDS) in 2011 shows how the discursive constructions around digital technologies in government have effects on practices. The negotiations and enrolment of actors, the definition of problems and how certain forms of knowledge gain authority over others provides insight into the influence, impacts and reverberations of a new organisational actor.

The second section looks at the socio-technical interactions of actors with organisational and political environments. Technologies are embedded and enacted through their use by organisational actors (Fountain, 2005: 7). To focus only on the objective properties of technologies is misleading. People find unexpected ways to use technology, resist using it or the technology may not work in the way intended (Elobaara, 2007: 417). The data highlights how understandings of technologies, and hopes and anxieties about potential opportunities or risks, have influenced choices of design and technologies in relation to e-democracy. Policy actors discussed how resources and skills limit possibilities but they also talked about finding ways to innovate, sometimes by circumventing barriers to achieve their aims. There was a tension apparent between the enactment of technologies within organisations and the opportunities for innovation development through collaborative interaction.

Investigation of the associations and interactions between different groups of actors forms the third part of the chapter. How actors connect with one another, how ideas and knowledge are shared and the means by which they negotiate and position themselves is significant in determining action or inaction in particular contexts. It alters and configures social and technical arrangements over space and time. I have previously noted how the heterogeneous actors involved in e-democracy can be seen as components of a dynamic network in which they define and shape one another. Networks operate horizontally rather than vertically and offer opportunities for co-operation, learning and making use of variable resources in a changing and uncertain environment. Using the empirical data, I looked at how relations between actors in the e-democracy network (EDN) developed and were maintained, the stability or precariousness of the network, and links or competition with other networks. By attending to these ongoing interactions, we can see how particular outcomes emerge and are enacted.

The conclusion brings together discussion about the influence of long-running and powerful discourses on the practices of e-democracy, with an assessment of the political, social and technical environment in which e-democracy practices are enacted I consider how actors in EDN simultaneously defined their own expertise in e-democracy and offered back their knowledge to other parts of government. Through the network, they exchanged resources to amass social and technical capital in using digital technologies to build bridges between citizens and government. In examining how EDN functions, I ask whether membership in the network enables actors to develop new conceptualisations, technologies or practices in e-democracy that challenge existing orthodoxies, or if the network produces outcomes that aligns with established interests, extending and incorporating dominant understandings of the citizen role through uses of technologies.

6.2 Government organisations as frameworks for action

Organisations are the setting in which practices happen. E-democratic practices are situated within and between government organisations. Organisations are socially constructed entities rather than external realities (although they frequently also have a material physicality). They are constantly assembling and reassembling meaning through the interactions of actors. Government departments are social spaces that seek to define and manage policy objectives, action plans and other artefacts according to stated political intentions. They are complex and porous, operating within a highly dynamic policy environment (Skelcher et al., 2005: 575). Many policy initiatives cut across departments and other organisations creating both uncertainty and opportunities.

The bundle of meanings contained within the umbrella term of e-democracy generates discursive practices around citizen participation based on ideas about who is included and excluded, what processes are effective and how it fits with other dominant ideas such as saving money, to establish a framework within which officials act. Within departments, actors are organised according to seniority, professional expertise or operational need. They have multiple and divergent interests and differing constraints on their actions which may conflict with their intentions to involve citizens in policy making.

6.2.1 Reforming civil service bureaucracy

Systems and processes are in place within government departments to manage the development of policies. They emphasise qualities of accountability through hierarchy, following rules and separation of tasks. There is an apparent contradiction between perceptions of the civil service as a traditional bureaucracy and the governance process in which multiple public, private and not-for-profit actors work together to commission, design and implement public policy. As discussed in Chapter 2, the civil service has managed to combine features of New Public Management (NPM) and governance with continuing aspects of bureaucracy and it is within this hybrid space that e-democracy policy actors operate. Some attributes associated with digital technologies such as flatter structures, more agile processes and flexibility challenge previous modes of organising although research suggests that in many situations, far from revolutionising the ways in which decisions are taken, new technologies simply reinforce pre-existing patterns and divisions (Fountain, 2005: 5, Pollitt, 2011: 380).

Many of the respondents framed their views in the context of a conflict with prevailing bureaucratic modes of operation which they saw as a barrier to digital innovation. One of the civil servants expressed her frustration at the civil service's failure to change:

> If Trevellian came back and you taught him to use a computer and a mouse, he would still be able to run the civil service. You have the folders, the files, the policy… That challenge about do you need to make the lurch into the 20th Century – let alone the 21st. Has our paradigm shifted at all?
>
> Nicola, civil servant

Sometimes this was expressed as tension between collaboration and hierarchy:

> You can see I'm struggling a bit because we have these policy tools that are about immediacy and non-hierarchy and iteration and yet a lot of the conversations we have are very formal and hierarchical.
>
> Anna, Civil Servant

Another civil servant tentatively suggested that while hierarchical structures and cultures impeded the use of digital technologies in government, she thought this would change over time:

> The current generation who are most comfortable with digital technologies are probably mostly not at senior level yet but will be shortly. Will their ease with digital tools overcome the organisational cultural pressures?
>
> Sheila, Civil Servant

The effects of modernisation on the civil service were experienced by civil servants in the study as a requirement to change institutional practices. Reform of the civil service has been a preoccupation of successive governments for reasons ranging from making government more joined up and strategic (HM Government., 1999: 6) to improving policy delivery and performance management (HM Government., 2012a: 8). Most of the focus is on increasing efficiency, improving service delivery and in cutting costs. However, the effects of reforms on resources, organisational arrangements and policy priorities also impact on e-democratic practices. In 2010, the Coalition government instituted strict economic rules for departments and many of the data group perceived reforms through the filter of resources, mainly financial resources.

> It is an ambitious schedule but it needs to be because the shortage of money is an important driver and where incumbent department solutions exist – they are very expensive and they will only get more expensive, so we need to save money there. And we really need to improve the offering to citizens and to professionals as well for whom the current offering on most sites, not all, is substandard.
>
> Kuldip, Civil Servant

Another respondent was more matter-of-fact about e-democracy not being a top priority but at the same time, she saw wider opportunities for officials to communicate more effectively with citizens which could lead to better democratic engagement:

> I think the ultimate goal is to make government more efficient and digital engagement is part of that but it is not the core part. The core part is whether people, businesses, stakeholders get information. Can they deal with government efficiently? Can that be done at low cost? Can issues like identity be managed sensibly? Those are the big wins, if you can solve those things, you can save millions of pounds and improve people's experience of government.
>
> Stephanie, Consultant

In many of the accounts given in the research, the narrative about saving money and accepting reduced costs was absorbed and accepted by the interviewees. They did not challenge the underlying rationality. Although there were clear references to the importance

of improving citizen engagement in policy documents and in the conversations of policy actors, there was also an acceptance that democratic engagement was an insufficient value in itself; it also needed to be allied with other economic and organisational benefits. Actors adapted their practices to manage reduced budgets and incorporated notions of digital technologies as a means of saving money compared to offline forms of democratic engagement.

However, there were some respondents who disputed this. Predominantly, these were the practitioners amongst the group. Their normative position was that if e-democracy was taken seriously, it would not cost less either financially or in other resources such as staffing and time:

> One of the great arguments that used to be used about e-government was that it would reduce the cost of government and it does reduce the transactional cost but it doesn't reduce the intellectual cost of government, it doesn't reduce the democratic side, in fact it increases it. You can't purely consult digitally, you have to do multi-channel.
>
> Fiona, Consultant

The practitioners within the group were the most resistant to the idea that e-democracy could or should be separated from wider democratic participation. Their view was not only that a more democratic approach by government would mean using both online and offline mechanisms but that citizens would be offered multiple opportunities to participate in different ways and at different points in the policy process, rather than at a single government determined juncture. From this perspective, the idea of e-democracy as a cheaper alternative was erroneous.

To what extent these divergent voices are shaping new e-democratic directions is not clear. There is a tension within government between finding innovative forms of citizen participation and the managerial and political desire to save money. Practitioners are at the interface of government and citizens. There has been a growth in professional participation experts who take on the role of managing e-democracy and other participation initiatives for civil servants but their role has not been extensively studied (Cooper and Smith, 2012). Practitioners see how policy is experienced by those who it affects. They have to manage the contradictions and dilemmas that become evident as policy becomes practice. They are able to modify practices through their interactions with citizens. Their reflections on what informs their choices and actions and their connections to other actors increases our understanding of what shapes e-democracy.

6.2.2 Differences between different groups

In the policy environment multiple heterogeneous actors and materials interact, assemble, disassemble, and reassemble in ways that confound conventional categories (Fenwick and Edwards, 2011: 709). In such open dynamic, pluralistic contexts outcomes emerge through the effects of relational interactions and assemblages, sometimes in messy or unpredictable ways. In this section, the role of different actors and their interactions in shaping e-democracy is examined more closely.

There were different views expressed about how much departments' core remits structured their approach to democratic engagement. Some felt that innovation by actors could develop previously unforeseen opportunities:

> The Foreign Office... They recruit a lot of senior people to blog and to tweet. They have 90 bloggers, not all ambassadors, but they write amazingly and some of them have a lot of engagement going. The ambassador to Somali in particular, he's a great example because actually for that community, the blog has become a place where - some of his posts have had hundreds of comments - a place where people can discuss ideas which they can't discuss in other places.
>
> Stephanie, Consultant

The Department of Health was frequently cited by respondents as an exceptionally innovative department in the way that it used digital technologies to engage with citizens:

> The other good example right now, perhaps the best I can think of in government, is the Department of Health. They seem to have managed to put in place enough policy process to make people feel this is a safe and sensible thing to be doing. They managed to recruit a lot of senior people, so director generals, nursing officers and others to use things like blogs and Webchats to get the message across, to start tweeting and they have so and so@DH in their user names.
>
> Stephanie, Consultant

This reflects findings by Cooper and Smith (2012) in which practitioners saw the department as innovative in its approach to e-democracy. However another respondent had a different view, noting that the Department of Health tried to control or suppress initiatives that originated outside the department. She spoke of how Patient Opinion, a forum for patients to discuss treatments and health services was initially vilified by the department although later they saw the value of patient inputs and incorporated it into the official structures.

Others spoke about departments where relations with the public were primarily conceptualised as clients rather than contributing citizens, structuring the information and opportunities for interaction. Within the Department of Work and Pensions for example (DWP) a different discourse is operating, in which poverty is seen more as the result of an individual's personal deficiencies or poor choices, resulting in a reliance on government welfare. The relationship is one of state provision; within the context of behaviour modification there are rules to comply with, or sanctions for lack of compliance, leaving little room for democratic discussion:

> The decisions for DWP are taken at the highest political level and what DWP is largely doing is implementing those political decisions so the room for engagement is very small and there are all sorts of trade-offs happening at the political level.
>
> Joanna, Advisor

The interviewees also spoke about how different departments and often particular sections within departments change over time. At different times departments or teams within departments can be innovative and enthused about engaging citizens through digital technologies but then, often through a change of minster, or permanent secretary or staff changes, departments or teams would lose focus, and energy and commitment would move from e-democracy to other initiatives. One example mentioned was when David Miliband was at the Office of Deputy Prime Minister (now Department for Communities and Local Government). In 2005 he generated new opportunities for digital engagement through his support for webchats and discussion forums, but once he moved to the Foreign Office, the momentum dispersed in DCLG (although the Foreign Office in turn became more innovative).

There was discussion about how the divisions between different professional groups affect outcomes. In particular it was noted that policy officials and communication officials had different understandings and behaviours in relation to e-democracy. Policy implications and progress were discussed in separate spaces and by different officials from discussions about the communication methods used to engage citizens. The approach was one in which policy officials conceptualised, problematised and made decisions on policy. They would subsequently ask communication officials to find ways to consult citizens for views on what has already been discussed. The implication of the split between roles was one that several respondents saw as problematic for democratic engagement:

> Perhaps it is just not ingrained in the way of working if you are a policy official to think that when you are planning or designing the policy, how will this be

> communicated. Your job is not to think about the political outcomes in a way, it is to think about policy outcomes whereas communications is always more political.
>
> Paul, Civil servant

> There is a big gap between policy and communications. Policy people think communications has got nothing to do with policy it is just sending out brochures to people and communications people think policy isn't about communication, it's about policy.
>
> Fiona, Consultant

The anxieties articulated here and by others in the study showed that many of the respondents considered there was a failure of understanding about the potential of digital technologies and this pervaded the civil service both vertically and horizontally. Digital expertise would be called upon to solve problems or conjure up whizzy infographics but this was seen as an additional option rather than inherently part of the policy process. In some ways, it mirrored the traditional attitudes towards IT as 'those guys in the basement'. A consequence of the division of roles was that policy officials did not necessarily understand how digital technologies could be creatively applied and digital officials might not have a thorough understanding of the policy implications. As will be discussed in more detail later, the creation of the Government Digital Service at the centre of government potentially and inadvertently worsened the problems by drawing digital expertise from departments and further away from the core of policy making.

6.2.3 Breaking the rules – innovation and standardisation

Not all policy actors were happy to work within the financial and organisational constraints. My fieldwork data uncovered a number of situations where actors sought to innovate or circumvent the rules. In part their actions were driven by a sense that they understood the digital opportunities better than those in more senior positions who took a more cautious view. This was particularly so for respondents who were working on emerging digital technologies in the early part of the 21st century:

> I think there are very good people in central government who really do get it and I think more people get it than did in the past. When I left Whitehall in 2006, it really did feel like a daily struggle, people trying to stamp out Web and communications technologies and now they know enough to know that they don't know.
>
> Gill, Consultant

Sarah, working in a government department as the Website manager found that she wanted to experiment with different possibilities but to a large extent she had to do this outside of her normal duties.

> It didn't take long for me, being in that job, to get frustrated with what I had. I had a very badly constructed website to manage. I had no money and no real ability to change things so I started looking around for other things to do. I had a roving brief around all things digital and I was getting interested in the engagement area….I started working on, if you like, piloting what a website might look like if we had the money…Someone noticed and we got into all sorts of trouble.
>
> Sarah, Civil Servant

There are some similarities with the concept of street-level bureaucracy in the relative autonomy of professionals working at the margins of government. The original concept focused on the discretion that officials had to allocate benefits and was developed well before Web technologies were considered in government. The similarities lie in how professionals work with each other to share practice and knowledge and how accountability to peers in the micro-networks is as important as hierarchical validation.

While in some situations policy was enacted through resistance and opposition, in others increased centralisation and standardisation within government potentially inhibited innovation. The creation of GDS generated both expected and unexpected effects across government. It was seen both as a hub for innovation across government but also as a barrier to developing creative work in departments:

> One of the biggest problems at the moment with the whole Government Digital Service is that it is enshrining hegemony of best practice and suddenly all this innovation that had popped up in government departments is being told to stop and hand it over…There has been some positive aspects to this centralising move but at the same time people are thinking 'hold on a minute – how do we innovate, what if we want to do something radical – we can't.'
>
> Fiona, Advisor

Developments in digital technologies have effects on structures and processes in government organisations. There is conflict between the impetus towards internal democratisation and the desire of organisations to regulate and manage citizen-government interactions. In some situations, officials have reduced direct contact with citizens as interactions are conducted through screen-level bureaucracy (transactions conducted online)

or system level bureaucracy in which citizens enter information directly into the system which then shares that information with other organisations to implement decisions (Bovens and Zouridis, 2002: 177). This would seem to work against the capacity of policy actors to exercise discretion in policy making. However, within the context of e-democracy, the options for screen or system level bureaucracy are restricted as actors seek direct interaction with citizens and this creates possibilities of creative interpretations in daily practices.

6.2.4 The rise of Government Digital Service

The remit for policy and for e-democracy remains with departments but responsibility for access to services provided by government has been moved to a single portal (gov.uk) run by the Government Digital Service (GDS). GDS was set up in 2011 following a recommendation by Martha Lane Fox to the Cabinet Office (Lane Fox, 2010). It has a mandate to require departments to organise their information in standardised patterns and even to manage the language they use. For example, as Kuldip explained, there are instructions on how to present policies, how often to update and where to link with other policies

> We will link up between the tools and transactions and the corporate information, and the teams behind the policy. So when you take part in a tool, a transaction, we will tell you who is responsible for that and how it is designed and any opportunities there might be to engage further if you want to. We will write, we are encouraging, no not encouraging, in fact we are mandating all departments to provide a catalogue of their policies and these will all be written in the same format.
>
> Kuldip, Civil Servant

At the time of the interviews, GDS was still a newly established agency, although it quickly occupied a dominant position in government. This caused some tensions with existing departments and was reflected in a number of comments which were critical of the 'GDS culture'.

> I think there is a danger of the digital community becoming too evangelical and losing a lot of credibility. GDS already has a reputation for a lot of smart kids in their jeans and sandals doing clever stuff but nothing to do with what we do.
>
> Thomas, Civil Servant

> The thing about GDS is that it moves very quickly and it doesn't have roots as much in the rest of government yet. So the feedback I hear, well a lot of people are

> unhappy actually, in the departments. It is difficult when a central team is formed full of bright sparks largely from outside, who talk about fixing government, who uncover awfulness and the sort of battles some people have been fighting for years.
>
> Stephanie, Consultant

GDS was conceived as part of the civil service reform programme to lead digital transformation of government. Reflecting the modernisation discourse, it was primarily conceived in relation to improving public services. The creation of GDS was a major institutional upheaval causing some potentially significant effects on e-democratic practices. Some of the interviewees highlighted how new GDS practices altered how citizens perceive and access policy through requirements to define, update and link policy issues in particular ways. The socio-technical assemblages on gov.uk guide citizens towards certain types of information and structure their opportunities to engage for example by collecting all government consultations in one place. This sets the framework for any further democratic participation planned by policy teams within departments.

Secondly, GDS acted as a magnet in drawing away digital expertise from the departments (although they also recruited outside government) into the centre, leaving departments with small digital teams who struggle to meet the demands of departments. One civil servant told me of a project to engage citizens in neighbourhood planning which needed minor amendments to information but despite this, it took several weeks for the changes to be made because the digital team was overstretched and prioritised other work.

An unforeseen consequence of bringing together disparate creative digital minds within the fold of GDS was that a number of GDS staff (not all) became increasingly interested in using digital technologies to improve democratic participation. Through the interviews and participant observation, I realised some GDS officials construed the overall goal of digital transformation as also encompassing e-democracy opportunities.

This respondent from GDS commented on how he became aware of the disconnect between government and citizens:

> There was a lot of talk amongst think tanks and the usual suspects around how closed off government is, or appears to be, when it comes to wide-scale engagement on policies that affect people's lives.
>
> Richard, Civil Servant

He went on to say how the development of gov.uk as a single government platform presented new democratic opportunities:

> The benefit of this being that as a citizen, if you did want to get involved in the policy debates, policy development, it would be so much easier to do if you knew that once you got to Gov.uk, that would be it, it would be fine. So we had a commitment to do that anyway. And then this came up and the possibility of widening participation, but not just widening it, making it richer.

GDS officials furthered their interest through meetings with practitioners working on democratic engagement, with developers to consider software applications and in organising seminars to discuss opportunities with other civil servants. They were drawn into the wider e-democracy network and in being part of the network they also changed it through their interactions. The outcomes and effects of these activities are still emerging and further research is needed to more fully understand the implications on e-democratic practices.

The examination of the effects of organisations on practices of e-democracy shows the tensions and competing pressures on officials in their attempts to develop democratic initiatives and this leads to some unpredictable and unintended consequences The Coalition government combined a desire to reform the civil service with a strong austerity drive. The combination initially appeared to significantly reduce the scope for democratic engagement. Publications and marketing budgets within departments were decimated. Departmental website and microsites offering democratic engagement opportunities were cut and marketing campaigns which often incorporated public engagement aspects were also stopped. The emphasis increasingly shifted (even more than previously) from citizen participation to improving services. There were continuing issues about senior managers blocking initiatives and divisions between professional groups and departments. However, it would be misleading to assume that all efforts to develop e-democratic initiatives have disappeared. The evidence indicates that sometimes officials find ways to create new opportunities. The increasing use of social media in government is generating a more conversational and iterative means of engagement although its impact is difficult to measure. In particular contexts, actors have circumvented the rules to experiment and adapt opportunities to develop participation. New institutional forms such as GDS are set up to achieve certain goals, but in doing so they also create new spaces in which other possibilities and new practices emerge.

6.3 All right Gov? Can government do the Web?[1]

The discussion about the relationship between technological change and administrative and political change has often focused on the opportunities provided by developing technologies to introduce change to organisations (Baldwin et al., 2011: 119, Christensen and Laegreid, 2010: 4, Bekkers and Homburg, 2007: 373). Initial expectations of Web technologies encompassed both internal aspects of administrations such as more flexible working patterns, flatter structures, and reduced office space; and external outcomes for service transactions including 24 hour access, quicker response times, and more joined up government (Chadwick, 2003: 445, Pollitt, 2011: 380). Government reports have particularly emphasised the transformative effects of technology both internally and externally (HM Government., 1999, Cabinet Office, 2006, HM Government., 2009). However, such understandings often conflate technological capacity with organisational outcomes failing to consider how technology interacts with organisational arrangements, capacities and concerns. The impact of technological change is contingent upon the institutional context, structures, processes and professional or cultural divisions as previously discussed, as well as the underlying power relationships and political ideologies driving change. Furthermore, an examination of how technologies are enacted needs to consider the inherent characteristics of the technology, its properties and affordances and how these interact with all the other factors (Pollitt, 2011: 380, Fountain, 2009: 101).

In applications of e-democracy, these complicated and sometimes contradictory features may have different effects. It has been noted that different attitudes, understandings, or commissioning of designs arise when the purpose of activity is to invite online democratic participation rather than the reorganising of back-office processes (Chadwick, 2011: 35). Examination of the effects of technological enactment on e-democratic practices has, however, generally received less attention.

The role of policy actors in implementing the use of digital technologies in government is of crucial importance. They are not simply users of the system but they select or privilege some technologies over others, they advise on designs, devise implementation processes, evaluate findings and make recommendations for the future. Some critics have suggested that the resistance of civil servants to adopting new technologies is an impediment to change (Fountain, 2005: 6). My data found little evidence of outright resistance amongst civil

[1] Title of online article by Rory Cellan, Jones, BBC Technology Correspondent about the launch of gov.uk

servants but a range of attitudes were presented; from reluctance to adopt new technologies and concerns about the risks, to a willingness to push technological and organisational boundaries. What is important here is how these different dispositions might shape practices.

6.3.1 Attitudes towards digital technologies within the civil service

The benefits of going digital in government were strongly advocated by respondents not only in terms of increasing citizen participation or delivering services more efficiently but in terms of the internal organisational benefits of improving communications; sharing knowledge more robustly; and developing more efficient working practices within departments and across government. In their discussions and interactions with other civil servants who were less knowledgeable or confident about using digital technologies however, a continuing level of unease about the adoption of digital tools for work was reported. For some, this seemed to be based on unfamiliarity with social media tools in a business context:

> The biggest thing I discovered was how basic we have to be – right down to why social media can be a business tool rather than just a frivolous thing that your kids do. This is the point about trying not to make it someone's job but to make it everyone's job…People are used to doing things through traditional channels but what you can do out of the social media is still very new and 'dark art' kind of thing.
>
> Thomas, Civil servant

For others, the reluctance originated from a perception of the risks involved for officials:

> I think the fear ranges from the usual 'social media is for kids.' to a genuine apprehension about the tools and a fear that we will be opening our policy making to voices that are presumed not to be valid, extremists or whatever.
>
> Kate, Civil servant

> Lots of civil servants are scared of the technology. I remember working with politicians who refused to discuss anything unless they had a technology expert sitting alongside to deal with difficult questions. There was a mystique around the technology. Civil servants are not usually appointed for their technological expertise, they have other skills.
>
> Sophie, Consultant

Knowledge and confidence about digital tools was often sporadically distributed within departments. More often, it was concentrated within digital teams numbering perhaps four

or five people who struggled to embed knowledge more widely throughout departments. As a result implementation was patchy, it was often dependent on one or two individuals who wanted to use new techniques, or who had experience in another setting of a successful project. Several of the respondents expressed concerns that digital engagement and innovation were not organisationally embedded. For example in one department they had a very constructive ongoing forum for discussion on a scientific policy but it was dependent on one person who ran the forum and when this person moved on the engagement faltered.

Respondents talked about a number of strategies to try to address this. One was training offered to all groups of civil servants not just communication officials. Some of the respondents were accredited training providers for the civil service. Respondents were also involved in drawing up guidance for civil servants on using social media (Government Digital Service, 2012). Another strategy suggested was for a member of the departmental digital team to be embedded with a policy team in order to suggest opportunities as they arose but also to offer reassurance to policy officials who might be unsure about what they could do. This was seen as an effective method but difficult to manage with limited staff numbers. Another civil servant spoke about her efforts to persuade senior management that using digital strategies was an important organisational requirement:

> What I have been trying to get across to leaders here is how digital touches absolutely everything we do and it isn't just technology and it is not just IT which I think is a really important point to get across. It is actually about using those tools and techniques that you use outside in your everyday life to do your job better frankly, and to serve people better.
>
> Thomas, Civil servant

The challenges were indicative of a deeply embedded cultural ambivalence towards technology at senior and more junior levels in the civil service. It suggests that technologies are seen as driving organisational change for better or worse rather than an understanding that the uses and consequences of digital technologies emerge from social interactions (Pollitt, 2011: 380). The scepticism expressed about the effects of digital technologies also reinforces doubts held by senior bureaucrats about the value of democratic participation.

Attitudes that suggest new technologies are imposed or superimposed on existing modes of work, shake confidence and perceived abilities to manage their use. In her work on technology enactment in government organisations, Fountain noted that policymakers, managers, administrators, operators, and workers have a strong influence on adjustments to organisational structures and processes. They are often overlooked yet they are the people

who need to develop expertise in the strategic uses of technologies to bridge the technological, political and programmatic logics (Fountain, 2005: 10).

Amongst respondents there was concern that civil servants were often lacking in expertise and confidence:

> The real challenge for civil servants is around technology, there is a sense that if it is about technology, it sounds a bit geeky and they don't know about databases. There is a real challenge around what we might think of as the issue of public technology – do you have enough people who know about what is possible to be an intelligent customer or an intelligent advocate or indeed critic of this stuff. It is a profound problem.
>
> Tina, Advisor

Departments are required to ensure appropriate levels of digital skills are part of core competencies, performance and objective-setting frameworks at all levels (HM Government., 2012b: 24) as well as developing specialist expertise in-house, Enhanced institutional capability in digital skills has become a key aim for the government as it seeks to provide training, raise awareness, and support new opportunities (HM Government., 2012b).

> There are skills to be developed in enabling people to use software to filter the material, the data but it needs people who are experts in their subject area or in their discipline – if the people (using the filtering software) are just digital people then we have failed, they need to be the people who are substantially involved in the actual work with policy making or service delivery.
>
> Kuldip, Civil Servant

A long term and structural issue identified by the interviewees was about the capacity of the civil service to manage ICT infrastructure. There has been a long sad history of ICT failure in government resulting in well publicised project failures (Public Administration Select Committee, 2011). Interviewees acknowledged the problems involved and sought to find explanations for the continuing difficulties:

> CEOs of banks and big companies - if you want a real challenge come to government. You have 20 million customers but DWP runs IT for 60 million customers. We break software. That is the scale challenge of working in government. It has to work for everyone, and vary services to meet people's needs
>
> Nicola, Civil servant

> Historically IT across government has been pretty poor, and that is a huge problem because it is an enabler. We are not talking about IT equals digital but if you don't have the right systems in place and you don't have the right tools to do your job then life becomes much more difficult. The technology aspect is absolutely critical and there is a slightly uncomfortable positioning at the moment between the digital community and the IT community which seems odd to me when we are all trying to do the same thing.
>
> Thomas, Civil servant

There has been a back story of reliance on a small number of large scale suppliers who 'lock in' departments to long-term contracts. This has consequences for e-democracy projects as well as other forms of e-government as restrictive clauses have in the past, limited the number of people who can access social media and stopped specialist software being added to the IT system. The government proposed solution to this problem is to work more closely with Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to enable more flexible and innovative opportunities. One of the respondents was very sceptical that this would result in real change:

> I was at the CBI conference last year when with my own eyes, I saw the Prime Minister say this. The Prime Minister addressed the CBI conference and he talked about targets for Whitehall spending and more to SMEs. As soon as that filters down past the Ministers to the senior civil servant level, they have no intention of bringing SMEs in because it means they have to change the way that they work.
>
> Mark, Consultant

The reputation for poor IT practice arises in part from outsourcing to IT experts who may not have an in-depth understanding of the policy process. This can have profound effects on e-democracy implementation because they use the same systems that other e-government initiatives use. Previous experiences of IT failures cause politicians and officials to be more cautious about spending money on digital innovations. Civil servants' experiences in dealing with anxieties about IT and digital skills provide some key insights not only into why some e-democratic initiatives falter or fail but also why some might never be commissioned.

6.3.2 Design and affordances

In this section, questions focused on how the design of systems and projects interact with the affordances of the technologies and whether technology in use adapts or interprets the original intentions. Design might mean a presentation of a design concept from start to finish although acceptance and execution of a design is rarely straightforward. More often design includes the choices that people make as they progress through a project, which then lead to other choices, some of which result in unforeseen consequences. The capabilities/limits of the technology are combined with the choices people make about how to use those capabilities (Bloomfield et al., 2010: 416, Leonardi, 2013: 751). Twitter for example has an affordance of 140 characters which sets limits on its use but this is combined with that innovative means that people find to communicate using hashtags, graphics and embedded links. Users do not come to the technology with a blank slate but bring with them previous experiences and frameworks from which they draw upon in use, overriding the view of the technology that designers sought to impose.

Design choices in government influence development for long periods of time as actors become tied into patterns set partly by shared understandings of what is required but also because of the political and economic costs of redesign. Fountain talks about websites in which navigation is a mystery because the organization of the website mirrors the (dis)organization of the actual agency. Or online transactions designed to be nearly as complex as their paper-based analogues. A third example is the proliferation of websites that get attached to every policy and programme (Fountain, 2005: 5). All of which is familiar to anyone who has attempted to access government online in the UK. Before the establishment of gov.uk as a single government portal, there were more than 400 websites across various Whitehall departments (Cellan-Jones, 2012).

In the story of CitizenSpace at the beginning of the chapter; the design of the project meant that choices made about silent moderation shaped discussions and the interaction of citizens and officials. The design choices are not necessarily final (potentially they could have made the moderators more interactive) but as long as they were followed, certain choices were closed off. A further notable feature of e-democracy in central government is the relatively small number of developers who worked with government and could offer the software or specialised knowledge for e-participation projects. There was some frustration on the part of respondents that this resulted in the same systems being used whatever the nature of the participation required:

> I think they feel like they are being rolled by the procurement, by the vendors. I

> think they think the vendors are selling them, not any old crap, but selling solutions that aren't a good fit because that is what they have got. … Actually it is what the civil servants will buy because where is the alternative and you buy what you know.
>
> Gill, Consultant

In short, e-democracy projects become (as do other technological initiatives) the product of initial design choices, which may be based on developer conceptions of participation as well as what software options they can offer. Financial and time constraints further limit affordances if for example budget cuts mean that updates cannot be purchased or staff may not have time to fully explore the possibilities of the software. The emerging practices may, as a consequence, be quite different from what was originally intended or envisaged. The affordances of the technologies are interpreted and appropriated by the capabilities or indeed the inventiveness of the people who use the software. Both officials and participants may find ways of using the technology that extend or restrict opportunities.

6.3.3 How open data practices impact on e-democracy

Earlier in the thesis, I discussed how government documents conceptualised open government data (OGD) as data that the public had a right to access and use. In the discussions and interviews with respondents, the topic of open data was of central importance and one they often returned to. Open Data is presented as making government more open and transparent (Cabinet Office., 2012: 12). The language used by the government about open data is ambiguous referring both to the availability and accessibility of data and the increased democratic accountability of government, potentially allowing the government to present open data as a democratic opportunity (Yu and Robinson, 2012: 186, Bates, 2013: 126).

The government started developing an interest in open government data while Gordon Brown was Prime Minister. *The Power of Information* (Mayo and Steinburg, 2007) was a catalyst for work to begin within government. The different networks who were involved in campaigning for and defining open data shared a number of common actors who could function between the networks, mediating information and activities. Although the different networks had their own set of goals, towards which they were working, they could also identify common interests around open data to which they could all subscribe. The various discursive aspects developed into a storyline about open data in which elements of the various discourses were combined into a more or less coherent whole, concealing the underlying discursive complexity (Hajer, 1993). Many members of the EDN were part of

this open data discourse coalition and they brought elements of the open data storyline into the discourse on e-democracy.

For this respondent, OGD was closely linked to civil service reform.

> How you get people rewarded and how we build it into the workflow, and how do we actually get it into the behavioural mindset, where the presumption to publish is the instinct rather than keeping information back. It is a massive cultural change.
>
> Tina, Consultant

For other actors developing open government data was a democratising strategy:

> So if you take e-participation as talking to the public, the other side is that the playing field has never been level. Civil servants feel they don't wish to consult the public because they are not informed enough. But one of the reasons they don't know is that civil servants have privileged access to information that is locked away. So open data and transparent government is levelling the playing field.
>
> Fiona, Consultant

> I only care about data because it is required to make these democratic services work.
>
> Kelly, Advisor

The publication of data was seen as a pre-condition for democratic engagement in policy making:

> What does evidence- based policy making mean unless it is a bit based on the data and it is sometimes surprising how this will be the tricky, holding people accountable to the data is a hard thing because actually the data isn't always there to support the policy. When it's all out there lots of people will be able to have a look and take a view about whether the evidence supports the policy in the way suggested.
>
> Tina, Advisor

For some respondents, open data was a distraction from the democratic argument. It meant that scarce organisational resources were spent on supporting open data releases rather than potential e-democratic projects. Data releases were seen as one-way information provision without the interactive or deliberative aspects of e-democracy.

> Data and information in and of itself, isn't very useful without context. I think the context is difficult to grasp and understand without engagement.
>
> Richard, civil servant

> Digital engagement is not about good data it is about transparency but on policy, not on data. Actually sometimes open data and transparency are almost the opposite of digital engagement. Putting information out there is not engaging at all if that data isn't supported.
>
> Stephanie, designer

> I'm in favour of a more transparent society but if I had to make the Internet a candidate for something, I'd make it a candidate for discussion rather than transparency because we have got a mass media that does on the whole, hold government to account. The difficulty is much more about the process of policy implementation, the formation of decision-making and this where I think the Internet has a role.
>
> Sophie, Advisor

To an extent, the storyline of openness and transparency in government is 'the glue' that binds actors together allowing problems to be framed and simplified (Lovell, 2008: 615). It enables engagement with open data to be constructed within a democratic frame of reference and as a challenge to closed-off decision making processes. However, it was also clear through the fieldwork that tensions and contradictions between understandings of open data and democratic participation were not resolved. My sample encompassed policy actors who worked on primarily on open data initiatives as well as those who had worked on e-democracy projects. Some considered transparency and democratic participation as integrated processes leading to more open and participative policy making but others were more cautious about how the relationship between open data and e-democracy worked in practice.

6.4 Networks and practices

I have characterised the respondents in my research as members of an e-democracy network (EDN). They are an interconnected grouping of individuals and organisations engaged in various on and offline practices focused around the dual aims of increasing citizen participation and improving the use of digital technologies in government. I have previously noted the distinction between the concept of policy networks which coordinate their members' interests towards specific policy goals and this looser, dynamic grouping which is less institutionalised, less stable, and less cohesive. The differences are not always that clear cut in practice, although policy networks are more aligned to an elitist model of governance, and the network governance perspective stresses that outcomes of policy and public services

are a consequence of the interaction of many actors in response to 'messy' policy problems (Blanco et al., 2011, Klijn and Koppenjan, 2012, Sorensen and Torfing, 2011). In this focus on outcomes we can also draw on the sensibilities of ANT as an emphasis on what happens in the process.

Some EDN actors were primarily interested in the use of digital technologies and others were more involved in developing citizen participation but they moved around in the same on and off-line spaces. Their various activities include working with local and central government on e-democracy projects, campaigning for issues around greater citizen participation, and developing and promoting various technologies associated with e-democracy and e-government. Not everyone knew everyone else but to a greater or lesser degree all the members were connected to others in the network. They engaged with each other through social media networks and other offline forums providing opportunities for a wider group of actors such as academics, developers, civic groups, government agencies and the media to feed into the network. Appendix D shows the connectivity of the network.

In this section, my intention is to examine through the empirical data, how the network operates and the potential effects on e-democracy practices by focusing on three areas of activity. First I look at how network relationships operate both in terms of relationships within the network and how members of the network interact with the wider civil service. Secondly, I look at how different types of knowledge; technological innovations, policy, or new ways of working are shared and used within the network. A third avenue to explore is to what extent actors in the network use their connections to accumulate socio-technical capital and how that is mobilised for their advantage.

6.4.1 Network relationships

Networks are an enduring form of social organisation. They provide adaptability, flexibility and support. At the same time, networks are dynamic they depend for their existence on the relationships and interactions between the actors in the network. There are aspects of Actor Network theory (ANT) in this understanding of a precarious web of elements (social and technical) whose continued existence depends on the relationality developed between human and non-human actors who together assemble and enact a set of practices (Law, 2007: 13).

Evidence of the relationships built and maintained was threaded through the interviews:

> It was a bit like having an internal agency which was a structure I was comfortable with. I'd been involved in that before. All of sudden, I was plugged back in with all of the people I knew socially still and I started going to all these…this was around early 2004…wonderful events that were happening.
>
> Sarah, Civil Servant

> With digital engagement particularly, you have good and bad days. Things work but sometimes projects drop off a cliff or you hit brick walls. It is quite important to have not just an online network, but people you can talk to.
>
> Stephanie, Consultant

> Actually we realised there was a lot of overlap, it seems as though it is a very small world. We consciously tried not to talk to the usual suspects but we often found ourselves a couple of people down the line who would say 'have you talked to so and so' and there would be a link back to that person.
>
> Paul, Civil Servant

An outcome of the relationships that were developed, was the support and solidarity formed between members. There was an emphasis on trust and reciprocity as values that enabled greater opportunities for collaboration and innovation. A further outcome of the connections between members of the EDN and government was the relatively frequent movement of many of the members between the civil service, voluntary sector and private sector. This gave them experience and contacts to leverage their position, forming new associations as individuals or collaboratively that built their capital up further. The value of this way of mapping relationships lies in how the actors in EDN seek to position themselves. Their occupation of the spaces in between enables them to exploit opportunities for citizen engagement which might not be as open to other forms of organisations.

> There are quite a few people who are not in government and are not exclusively digital but who have an interesting perspective on it. I found them a useful network because they counter balance the people who are just talking about digital and digital tools.
>
> Stephanie, designer

The role of networks in bringing in actors from outside government gains more import in times of transition or uncertainty. There is a sense that for some government officials, the

combination of emerging uses of social media and apparent deepening of public distrust in government institutions pushes them to look for new answers. If the answers do not lie within government, they have to find and talk to people from other sectors. E-democracy has never solely been the preserve of state government. From its origins in the UK, those working in government have always sought inspiration from external sources. By working with a range of actors, the government has been able to draw upon new ideas and new ways of working. The boundaries between actor groups are blurred and shifting as actors move in and out of government and between different organisations.

The emerging innovative, horizontal, networked forms of governance such as those found in e-democracy circles has empowering but also potentially undemocratic effects for citizens (Skelcher et al., 2005: 575, Swyngedouw, 2005: 1991). The informal institutional arrangements often offer increased possibilities for participation but the design and delivery of e-democracy is carried out by actors outside government who do not have the mechanisms for transparency and accountability that exist within government. This was rarely explicitly discussed by respondents in my sample although some of them compared their work favourably with non-democratic practices of larger non-governmental organisations. These new forms of governance exhibit an alternative articulation of power and citizenship in which policy actors facilitate democratic participation of citizens in ways that might be potentially undemocratic and authoritarian.

6.4.2 Knowledge sharing through networks

The EDN is a medium for sharing forms of knowledge between members allowing for an increase in the common store of knowledge. This could be in relation to their application of technologies, or knowledge about a policy area, particularly if that policy encompassed specialist knowledge. Knowledge was also passed on in the form of useful contacts or by sharing experiences of implementation (including solutions to problems):

> I was desperately trying people in other departments who were like minded. It really brought them out of the woodwork. The best session in that event was how to build a Wordpress site because nobody knew how to do it.
>
> Sarah, Civil Servant

Online forums, particularly Twitter are also a medium through with knowledge was shared between the policy actors. It provides a space for people to ask questions or raise points of discussion and to share new ideas and uses of technologies. It is a platform on which actors

built trust with each other and shaped understandings. New concepts can be generated through social media, accumulating authority as actors 'buy-in' to the idea. As some ideas become more powerful and others less so, other ideas and objects are reorganised and reassembled by the actors (Healey, 2013: 1516).

> Actually the network I use most is Twitter…examples of what's going on, share what I'm doing, ask questions.
>
> Stephanie, consultant

There are regular opportunities for EDN members to meet offline through the monthly Teacamp meeting which is open to all, held in a public space and widely advertised in government. It usually features a speaker and opportunities for discussion. While I was observing the group, the speakers included someone from the Youth Parliament talking about opportunities for young people to get involved in e-democracy; the Open Knowledge Foundation campaigning for more transparency, and senior civil servants talking about how they wanted to implement open policy making. There were discussions on new technological applications in government and hack days arranged to generate technological solutions to policy problems. Annually there is an unconference GovCamp attended by over 1000 people in central London which provides additional opportunities to discuss new ideas and meet people. The forums and events also allow opportunities for the EDN to align itself with other associated networks, enabling common interests to be shared and identified:

> Those communities…mailcamp, govcamp communities they are nice because they span central government, local government, people who just have an interest in this sort of stuff, some people are students. There are very low boundaries
>
> Stephanie, Consultant

To what extent such opportunities shape or make practices is not easy to show but it does indicate that knowledge is being circulated amongst networks that are connected to government through a variety of channels. It has some resonance with the concept of translation, the processes through which an idea or technique moves from one site to another. Networks of interested parties are enrolled into recognition of the value of the concept. In this way, concepts accumulate power and become more authoritative (Healey, 2013: 1516). An example of how concepts develop is shown by how open data gradually became more mainstream and accepted in government circles.

6.4.3 Accumulating capital within the network

The links between policy actors provide opportunities to generate social and technical capital by aggregating their resources, providing credentials for each other and creating distinctive spaces, characterised by their knowledge, experiences, contacts and language. For Bourdieu (1986), capital refers to the skills, abilities, and resources that allow an individual or group to wield influence and power over what is at stake in a given social arena. Drawing upon his ideas, we can see that the EDN enabled members to accumulate socio-technical capital and provide a platform from which assets could be converted through links with the wider civil service and politicians, and also with developers, campaigners and local government.

Some spoke about their relationships with senior politicians as a means of influencing policy direction:

> It came about from people, civil servants in Cabinet Office and No 10 going 'we really like using your websites can we talk to you? That went from 'can we talk to you?' to 'what you are doing seems like a really good website, why aren't there more things like this?' I then told them what has to happen for there to be more services like that.
>
> Kelly, Advisor

Others highlighted their links with external sources:

> They have really good links with democracy activists, a lot of technology companies who do some engagement. Also they know vendors who are set up precisely to enable better discussions. So it was a good way of tapping into their networks, it was very useful.
>
> Richard, Civil servant

Respondents strove to mobilise their technical capital to gain resources and position in their attempts to define themselves as the prominent expert in their field for example in open data, or open policy making, discussion forums or crowdsourcing. They are in constant competition with others who also want to define themselves as the experts, as the people who the government will seek out for advice. However they also work with one another, making recommendations about other actors, endorsing innovations and enhancing reputations.

Secondly, technical capital can be accumulated through control of the design of e-democracy projects, either through specific software which is needed to operate the project, or

designing the project using non-bespoke software but shaping access and responses through design and pathways of the interface. There are relatively few software applications that focus on e-participation so those that do such as 'Delib', a software company that works with government and agencies, have a strong position in the market.

A third way in which technical capital can be amassed by actors is in through their ability to deliver publics to the government in ways that are manageable for government policy. This is partly about the design of projects but also about the actors' ability to find citizens who are prepared to contribute. They seek to present themselves as the right people to find the right audiences. For example the NHS Citizen project held a series of on and offline forums which focused on providing a voice for citizens in the NHS. For such projects there are issues of inclusion and representation to be considered as well as the need for the project to show that contributions have been heard.

> We are asking a representative (or more or less representative) group of the public, giving them information, and a set of questions in order to better understand how, or what other facets of the conversation that we don't understand. We are not claiming that everyone thinks this, or that this group thinks this but what we are doing is having greater insight into what the public might think if they were given more information.
>
> Joanna, Advisor

By examining how capital is accumulated and converted to confer advantage on some actors over others, we can also see how particular practices might be prioritised or become less used. The control of forms of software or design can privilege certain ways of doing e-democracy. For example in the early 2000s, the discussion forum was the dominant form of online participation in policy ideas which may have excluded those who were less confident with some forms of technology or less able to convert other forms of capital. Socio-technical capital is a variable commodity and it can also be depleted by unexpected setbacks as happened with e-voting.

6.5 Conclusion

My objective in this chapter was to look at what shapes the practices of e-democracy. What are the concepts, assumptions and motivations present in dominant discourses, applied, or attempted in e-democratic initiatives? How are these interpreted by policy actors who are subjected to multiple conflicting and contradictory pressures? I considered how the discussions and positioning amongst key actors interacted with organisational arrangements

and structures within which e-democracy is embedded. The empirical data focused attention on the social structures and constructions surrounding digital technologies in democratic governance processes and the strategies employed by actors in appropriating these as a means of defining and implementing e-democracy.

This chapter began with a story about CitizenSpace, an e-democratic project, devised to offer participation through electronic channels and promising a direct link to the Prime Minister (Wright, 2006a: 241). CitizenSpace is an illustration of what happens when technology-led misconceptions of audience and purpose are compounded by failed executions of practice arising from both structural issues (there were no policy owners to respond to the discussion threads) and design of the space. The perceived failure of CitizenSpace caused changes in practices by moving from large scale discussion forums to departmental and policy led forums. The pattern of sometimes abrupt changes in practices has been repeated in other e-democratic initiatives, for example in the failure to implement e-voting. This is not behaviour restricted to e-democracy but it supports comments made by some of the respondents in my research that e-democracy policy and practice is not coherent, it is erratic and subject to sudden changes of direction.

CitzenSpace is an example of how embedded ideas of modernisation construct and mobilise meanings about how citizens would participate, how discussions were conducted and the government would respond (or not). Meanings became institutionalised in practices and in doing so become invisible. A task in analysing e-democracy is to explicate the discourses embedded in institutions and examine the consequences in policy agendas, resource allocations and technological choices. Assumptions and ideological choices inherent in discourse are constantly being challenged through conversation, interpretation and practices. So in this chapter, we have seen how some policy actors seek to subvert organisational norms through innovation or impatience. Others bring in understandings from other agendas such as civil service reform or open data and seek to apply it to e-democracy.

Internal concerns within the civil service have significantly affected e-democratic practices. Civil service reform and the financial cuts to government departmental budgets after 2010 were often uppermost for many of the officials interviewed. This sometimes directed them to see e-democracy as a cheaper form of participation than offline methods while still preserving the narrative about the importance of citizen involvement. There was also a perception that many senior managers blocked innovation either because they perceived it as risky or because they failed to comprehend the technologies involved. Some respondents however found ways to circumvent authority and set up online opportunities and share ideas

with others. I drew upon the concept of street level bureaucrats to explain how professionals on the margins or away from the centre of organisations develop modifications to practices and depend more on the input of peers in their networks.

While such modifications happen at the edges, a more central organisational disruption has been caused through the establishment of the Government Digital Service. It pulls in expertise from the departments and from the EDN and other networks. It is attempting to standardise the digital offering from departments and through this process is framing and shaping new understandings of policy and practice. There are tensions between GDS and the departments because of the imposition of practices, yet some actors in GDS perceive themselves as outliers who are radicalising and shaking up government.

Discussing the experiences of actors around the enactment of technology in organisations drew attention to the fears about technologies that exist within departments and the fears help to cause a separation of tasks between policy and digital. Digital teams were often given the responsibility of implementing e-democratic processes on behalf of policy colleagues. The danger flagged up by some, was that digital specialists understood the tools but perhaps had less comprehension of how citizen participation could contribute to particular policies. At the same time, policy officials' lack of confidence or knowledge about the applied contextual uses of technologies potentially constrained possibilities for innovative participation. The issues were compounded by IT infrastructure problems and historically restrictive contracts.

The focus on the EDN and other networks considered how relationships and practices are shaping e-democracy. The relationships between actors constructs a web of understandings, technical knowledge and locations that enables them to assemble 'precarious reality' (Law, 2007: 7) around e-democracy. The bonds that developed between them enabled the actors within the network to enhance their social capital by separating and distinguishing them from others. Concepts such as open data and open policy making moved within and across networks accumulating power and authority as they were discussed. EDN members are intermediate between government and other networks such as those focusing on open data or civic participation. The chapter has explored how knowledge is shared between networks and how actors coalesce around particular storylines to develop agendas, even if they have quite different interests.

In the introduction to the chapter, the question was asked if the EDN is a radicalising or normalising influence on how e-democracy is understood in government. There is no definitive answer to this question because the network is not a cohesive force working for

particular interests. It is much more dispersed and unfocused, and is itself a product of wider governance forces. Through the interrogation of the fieldwork data, it becomes apparent that e-democracy actions are defined by a messy amalgamation of organisational pressures, technical capacity and shifting relationships between actors. The concept of e-democracy is often evaluated in terms of what is has achieved, the focus is on outcomes. However, in paying attention to the smaller, more mundane processes at play and tracing the connections and combinations that result, an alternative perspective is that outcomes emerge from many interactions and are mediated by and contingent upon specific contexts and timings. The consequences of practices therefore are not linear or always predictable. Careful examination of what shapes practices and what happens in the enactment of practices allows for more insightful and critical probing of the evolution of e-democracy.

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Chapter 7: **Conclusion**

7.1 Revisiting the research aims and questions

The main question for this thesis is: how do policy actors understand and enact e-democracy? To further expand on this question, the thesis additionally probed how differing conceptualisations of democratic participation influence understandings of e-democracy. It looked at how policy actors' perceptions and experiences of Web technologies frame and define e-democratic initiatives. And it examined the significance of interactions between policy actors in different networks and spaces in e-democracy's development and impact.

To find answers to these questions, I embarked upon an investigation of e-democracy by examining the role of policy actors. I used methods of semi-structured interviewing, participant observation and documentary analysis to explore how policy actors have conceptualised democracy and citizen participation in democratic systems. It was only by understanding and interpreting their approaches to democratic participation more widely that I was able to trace the development of ideas about e-democracy. To analyse the relationship between ideas and practices, I looked at actions and outcomes emerging from the interactions of the policy actors. The associations between people, institutions, technologies, and texts demonstrated how priorities and agencies emerged as the actors in the network assembled to enact what is imagined. Multiple interactions produced outcomes that in turn, fed back into discourses to strengthen, challenge or modify them.

This thesis is grounded in long standing concerns about the health of democracy in the UK, underpinned by the persistent tension between enduring continuing commitment to democratic norms and values and the indisputable evidence about democratic engagement in practice (Coleman and Blumler, 2009, Smith, 2009, Stoker et al., 2011). Dalton suggests that success of democracy can be measured by the public's participation in the process, the respect for citizens' rights and the responsiveness of the political system to public demands (Dalton, 2013: 4). This echoes Coleman's claim that government responsiveness is central to the ideal of democratic legitimacy (Coleman and Shane, 2012: 24).

Enacting democracy presents a core dilemma in the balance between participation and representation. One direction is to assume that government is elected by sufficient votes to give the elected representatives a mandate to make political decisions on behalf of citizens. A different approach is that to fully represent the interests, preferences and values of a diverse population, the government needs to tap into citizens' experience and expertise to provide

both knowledge and legitimacy in policy making. Different governments and different elements within government veer between these two positions over time, aligning differently for different policies and different policy stages. The point here is that governments feel compelled (to a degree at least) to find ways of involving citizens in policy. Digital technologies appear to offer governments the potential to reach more citizens, more often in order to achieve this.

In turn this raises questions about how policy actors' envisage the citizens who are asked to participate. I examined the question in the literature review from an academic perspective and in the empirical research through analysis of government documents and the talk of policy actors. Citizens are not a naturally occurring phenomenon, or a pre-existing physical entity. They are constructed, imagined and defined in multiple ways which then affects government responses. Lack of confidence amongst policy makers about the competence of citizens leads to top down government strategies intended to promote responsible citizenship which are central to the shaping of civic behaviour (Coleman and Moss, 2012: 5). Other agencies and non-state actors are also involved in efforts to shape citizen participation in various 'technologies of citizenship'(Barnett, 2002: 314). The thesis demonstrated how policy actors variously imagined citizens as empowered consumers or as members of local communities or as 'armchair auditors' of government, or less commonly, as contributors to policy through their experience or knowledge. My research showed that the roles citizens were assigned had effects on the design, implementation and evaluation of particular e-democratic projects, specifying different forms of access, information and opportunities to contribute over other possibilities. For example on gov.uk the configuration of citizens as consumers of government services allows citizens to apply for a driving licence in a relatively straightforward way but it is far less obvious how they would comment on or seek to change transport policy.

From the contested terrain of democracy and the construction of citizenship, the thesis charted discussions of the term 'e-democracy'. I began the thesis with a definition provided by the OECD that e-democracy is about using ICT as a tool to enhance citizens' involvement in public policy-making (OECD, 2003:1) but this definition has limitations. It does not encompass the role of social structures, human agency or the organisational context in shaping e-democracy. The literature review demonstrated that agreement about what constitutes e-democracy is no less contested than the concept of democracy. There is little consensus amongst scholars about the scope or boundaries of the concept. Some authors focus on particular examples of e-democracy such as discussion forums (Wright, 2006b). Others examine voice and inclusion in e-democracy (Albrecht, 2006) or create typologies of different forms of e-democracy (Coleman and Moss, 2013, Fung et al., 2013).

The disagreement about what constitutes e-democracy was also reflected in the empirical findings. The diversity of actors from different organisations and agencies meant an array of understandings and motivations were applied to the concept of e-democracy. Some focused on deliberative forums or social media while others adopted an understanding of e-democracy as empowering service users. These were often elided with the idea of reform of government particularly in the understanding of some respondents that open data was a participative project. My argument here is first that the varied accounts from respondents illustrates how the interplay of situation, discourse and practice shapes the construction of e-democracy. Secondly it shows how spaces for resistance to dominant interpretations can be opened up in micro-contextual situations offering opportunities for new interpretations of what e-democracy might entail.

From my research, it became clear that the role of actors involved in defining and delivering e-democracy was significant but largely unexamined in previous work. Although civil servants are important actors in this context, policy and practice extends beyond civil servants to encompass a number of external individual and organisational actors. The thesis was able to trace how some actors were able to influence governments in developing particular forms of digital technologies both for e-democracy and for other uses of technologies in government. The development of open government data and the consequent effects on e-democracy is an example of how some policy actors were able to achieve aims in one area (establishing open data as a priority for government) but in doing so marginalised other forms of e-democracy. It was only through the empirical research that I was able to map the intricate connections that shaped what happened in particular contexts and how these continue to have an impact on understandings and practices.

7.2 Key findings from the research

In the first chapter of the thesis, I put forward the argument that understandings of e-democracy are influenced by wider discourses relating to modernisation which conceptualise citizen participation predominantly as a consumer or monitor of government services and performance. Challenging this modernisation discourse is an alternative discourse defining democratic participation as co-productive and collaborative in policy and decision making and this can challenge or modify the dominance of modernisation in particular contexts. E-democratic initiatives reflected this tension with some, earlier projects, in particular, focusing on opportunities for citizens to discuss and potentially influence policy decisions while other initiatives defined e-democracy as feedback on service provision, one-way information or opinion giving. More recently the development of Open Policy Making (OPM) illustrates the

dialectical interaction between ideas of reform of the civil service and new opportunities to collaborate with citizens in policy making. Policy actors need to be understood both as products of dominant discourses and as agents of change (Fischer and Gottweiss, 2012: 12). Their practices are constitutive of discourse in making some knowledge legitimate and specifying certain forms of action over others but practices also materialise through networks of actors who negotiate, translate and mobilise data, resources, and expectations.

A further and connected argument made is that the persistence of belief in the transformative properties of Web technologies indicates that e-democracy has been seen primarily as the introduction of digital technologies to democratic governance procedures. This runs the risk of reifying technology, considering it as an objective entity which has independent causal powers rather than as a socio-technical co-construction of processes and activities. This is not to deny the importance of analysing more visible structures, procedures or design features in order to compare types of initiatives but the approach this thesis has taken is to focus on the underlying social constructions and relationships that influence both processes and outcomes.

7.2.1 The continuing importance of modernisation in e-democracy

The documentary analysis of government papers found that ideas of modernisation played a central role in the perceptions of citizen participation (Barnett, 2002: 310) when Labour was elected to power in 1997. Labour was committed to the renewal of government and public services through collaboration, partnership and inclusion. Combined with the desire to increase the width and depth of public participation was an enthusiasm for the emerging Web technologies as an embodiment of modernisation. It was the combination of both elements that discursively constructed e-democracy, separating it from nascent ideas in the previous government which were more narrowly focused on service delivery (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 3). My research found that discourses of modernisation continued to be influential and were later embellished by themes of transparency of government. Labour under Gordon Brown was a keen advocate of using digital technologies to make government more transparent and accountable and this was taken forward by the Coalition government.

Through the fieldwork I found that understandings about modernisation of government were deeply embedded in the discourses that policy actors drew upon to shape e-democracy. This not only related to the reform of the public sector but also in their perceptions about democratic renewal, the comparative value of representative and participative forms of governing and the selection and uses of different technologies. It was articulated and disseminated in conversations, meetings and contributions to government papers. Within this

discourse, the citizen was primarily perceived as a consumer of government services who wants efficiency and value for money; or as an empowered individual at the local or community level, with rights and responsibilities to make good choices; or perhaps as a citizen who monitors government and challenges costs and performance. The dominance of this discourse meant that it was often seen as common sense or inherently 'right' by policy actors. Although the linking of the modernisation discourse with understandings of citizen participation has been previously discussed in the literature, the fieldwork provided new insights into how modernisation shapes discursive constructions of e-democracy through its influence on the technologies and designs selected, as well as the implementation and evaluation of responses.

Within any discourse, there are always conflicting unresolved elements. Actors actively try to influence the definition of the problem and to change the meanings assigned over time. There is a constant struggle to maintain the old order or to bring in new understandings and new practices. In the interviews and through the participant observation, there was evidence of tension between commitment to democratic participation and reconciling these with organisational discourses about reducing costs and streamlining administrative procedures. For some actors, particularly those currently working in the civil service, the resulting ambiguity caused some discomfort as they tried to combine opportunities for citizens to be involved in government with the requirement to save money. This tussle was evident in several examples offered by the respondents in the fieldwork about what was seen as successful forms of e-democracy. For these actors, e-democracy initiatives involving large numbers of citizens and which were more statistically representative of the wider population were considered more legitimate and cost effective than those involving smaller numbers.

It was apparent that while some tried to accommodate the contradictions by seeking large numbers of participants while closely defining input, other actors sought to increase the depth, range and reach of online democratic participation. Underlying the discussion on different democratic norms and models is a conflict between ideas of representative and participative forms of democracy. The policy actors who argued for more citizen participation in policy making were not suggesting that representative modes of democracy should be replaced by participatory forms but that they should supplement and strengthen them. However, the dominance and continuity of the modernisation discourse in many areas of government means that it continues to wield significant influence on e-democracy ideas and initiatives so that invited participation was often more limited and advisory than advocates of more participatory forms of democracy were seeking.

7.2.2 Enacting Web technologies in e-democracy

E democracy is also shaped by how technologies are enacted in government organisations. As discussed above, an outcome of this was the perception by policy actors that use of digital technologies in attracting citizen participation would be more efficient and save resources. Yet, it can be argued that for e-democracy, reduced budgets means less money to spend on creative or innovative designs. The thesis found that civil servants have to take into account the cost of projects, the time they run them for and how resource intensive they are to manage. Staff cuts mean fewer staff in government departments who are expert in developing and running initiatives. More tangible and quantifiable e-government projects further reduce the capacity for e-democracy within government.

E-democracy actors (some of whom are civil servants) have a pivotal relationship with government departments. They interact with government departments at every stage of an e-democracy initiative. The processes are embedded in institutional arenas providing rules, norms routines, cognitive scripts, and discourses that structure the actions of the actors (Sorensen and Torfing, 2011: 860). To take one example, to commission work outside of government requires following complex procurement procedures. In the research, I found that procurement procedures shaped conceptualisation and design of projects in order to meet restrictions on cost, timing or to receive senior management permissions. Some initiatives were discussed but never realised due to the constrictions of procurement. More research is needed into how issues of cost and propriety potentially disguise more widespread structural and cultural barriers to meaningful e-democracy that exist amongst policy makers. It is imperative these systemic barriers to meaningful participation are addressed, if the vision of accountable democracy is to be realised (Woodford and Preston, 2013: 359).

In addition to concerns over resources, respondents discussed the attitudes within government departments towards digital technologies and how understandings, confidence or capacity can alter what happens in the management of e-democratic initiatives. Views expressed by some policy actors indicated a deeply embedded cultural ambivalence towards technology in the civil service. The scepticism expressed about the effects of digital technologies may also reinforce doubts held by senior bureaucrats about the value of democratic participation. The fear of technologies appeared to contrast with accounts of Web technologies in government documents in which technology was seen as transformative, leading or imposing changes in government. However, whether technologies are seen as having a negative impact or a transformative one, the same idea is invoked that technology is

an autonomous and largely unassailable force and this underlying concept shapes and legitimates much government policy.

The research highlighted the significance of the Government Digital Service (GDS) as a powerful actor in government. GDS was set up in 2011 with a remit was to improve digital services for users and increase digital skills across government. GDS has the power to ensure departments organise their information in standardised patterns, it provides instructions on how to present policies, how often to update and where to link with other policies on a single government portal (gov.uk). Such processes have effects on the construction of e-democracy in terms of how citizens are conceptualised, how they access information online, and what they are asked to contribute. Yet the empirical research also uncovered that GDS is a space where creative digital minds gather, discuss and share knowledge. An unforeseen consequence of their interactions was the increasing involvement of some GDS staff in developing and shaping ideas of e-democracy. GDS officials furthered their interest through meetings with practitioners working on democratic engagement, with developers to consider software applications and in organising seminars to discuss opportunities with other civil servants. They were drawn into the wider e-democracy network and in being part of the network they also changed it.

7.2.3 Interactions between actors shapes e-democratic practices

The data sample of policy actors was not intended to suggest that every actor connected with e-democracy was contacted for the research but a finding from the sampling process was the realisation that policy actors involved in e-democracy in the UK at the national level are relatively few in number and they operate across spaces in e-government and open data as well as e-democracy. In following up recommendations about who should be interviewed, two salient discoveries were made. First, it quickly became clear that civil servants were not the only actors responsible for developing and implementing initiatives. Individuals and organisations from public, private and the voluntary sectors were involved in all stages of conceptualising and constructing e-democracy. The role of officials in shaping e-democracy is important but equally so are their relationships with other policy actors in this field. Secondly, I also found the actors involved in e-democracy were highly inter-connected. In following the actors, their associations with each other and interactions with other material entities such as technologies, organisations and documents became visible in ways that would not have been otherwise so apparent. Revealing the mobility, density and richness of the connections between the policy actors was significant because it showed how knowledge was circulated and discursive constructions built. The policy actors are intermediaries who use their

connections to facilitate funding, ideas, or projects. Their links with, and easy movement within the institutional landscape play an important role in pulling together various technologies, inscriptions, and non-human actors enabling them to forward knowledge claims, allow certain agendas to emerge, and construct (both discursively and practically) the subject positions of policy makers, politicians, professionals, and citizens.

Relationships between policy actors in e-democracy were not institutionalised or permanent but developed through on-going performance and repetition of practices (although they often have connections to more established structures too). The connections are manifested through sites of interaction such as the Teacamp meetings and Twitter and through work undertaken with government departments and agencies, with developers and particular types of software such as Delib. The actors also interact with other networks including academics, campaigners and software developers. The density and positioning of interactions generates effects on ideas, innovations and behaviours. In particular contexts, different relationships, identities and resources are assembled.

One example is the means by which the open government data (OGD) agenda developed and accumulated authority as knowledge, technologies and ideas were shared. OGD moved from initial external lobbying of government from freedom of information campaigners and academic interest to a central concern for government. As it circulated, the OGD agenda accumulated legitimacy, and reorganised other elements in the network. For example civil servants were tasked with releasing government data, new statistics were published showing the data released and its frequency, new regulations were developed regarding the quality of data, technologies and platforms able to handle large datasets were prioritised and so on. Since the pool of actors involved in digital technologies in government is small, many actors previously working on e-democracy initiatives were diverted into working on open data instead.

7.2.4 The implications for e-democracy

Many would argue that e-democracy in the UK has been limited and largely unsuccessful (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 2, Chadwick, 2009: 16, Prachett, 2007: 1). This is despite supportive political rhetoric and financial commitment at various stages in successive administrations. The findings of this thesis go some way to explaining why e-democracy is perceived as marginalised rather than a routine and embedded part of government business.

The findings indicate that policy actors contribute to the development of e-democracy policy but at same time they are subject to contradictory processes including existing commitments,

alternative policies, administrative reforms, technological failures or failures in use. The view that policy implementation is rational, linear and ordered is challenged by the empirical research which shows the messiness and the 'wild profusion' of policy in practice' (Ball et al., 2011: 11). In emphasising the differences in policy enactment and the importance of interactions and interpretations the research also showed that these are set against a prevailing discourse of modernisation providing a framework within which e-democracy works, albeit with occasional outbursts of creativity or resistance.

The voice of policy actors in developing and implementing e-democracy is particularly relevant to understanding how e-democracy is positioned in relation to other government priorities and policies. The actors' view of e-democracy frequently conceptualised citizen participation in the context of reform of government, placing an emphasis on citizen input into service delivery, efficiency and performance. More recent directions towards greater transparency and accountability of government adds additional weight to the idea of the citizen providing comment or scrutiny on what the government provides rather than being able to contribute to policy development and decision making. The findings from the thesis show that policy actors draw upon dominant discourses in their understandings of citizen participation and these are enacted through digital technologies and design of participatory initiatives.

Findings about the impact of the modernisation discourse on the shape of e-democracy can be fruitfully combined with an examination on the relationships, interactions and negotiations between actors. This allows consideration of e-democracy both from the macro level in which policy is framed by ideas of democracy and citizenship but at the same time examines the actual dynamic processes which produce entanglements, disorder and unforeseen effects in everyday practice. By following the actors and uncovering embedded modes of thought and meaning, we can probe in more insightful and critical ways, why e-democracy policy has been 'disappointing' (Coleman and Moss, 2013:1). Focusing on the role of the policy actors has particular value in uncovering otherwise obscured dynamics (Chadwick, 2011: 23) of e-democracy and in providing explanations for the limited success in the UK government's ability to fully utilise the Web in policy formation and decision making. Examination of their interactions helps to explain why some forms of technology and activity prevailed over others, the longevity of some projects and the untimely end or stuttering progress of other initiatives.

The findings show there were competing views about whether e-democracy consisted of single, defined projects introduced at particular stages of a policy process and prioritising the forms of technology used, or an alternative perception that e-democracy was not distinct from

other forms of public engagement and was ongoing, conversational and iterative. This disparity is important because if e-democracy is understood only as one-off specific initiatives, than its development will continue to be fragmented and difficult to integrate with policy making processes. There is clearly a long way to go before institutionalised participation has more policy efficacy. The real challenge is to find ways for incremental opportunities to be realised through opening up spaces, developing imaginative design and more collaborative innovation.

7.3 Contribution to research literature

Answering the research question has meant drawing upon a range of academic disciplines including political science, sociology and social policy. An inter-disciplinary approach involves balancing different theories, methods and analytical techniques. In doing so, the research is informed by a wider range of perspectives and inputs which allows for deeper, more richly textured explanations of complex social worlds. Pursuing an inter-disciplinary path poses its own challenges in reconciling the different constructions of knowledge and explanatory logics (Mason, 2006: 19). However interest in and openness to what different approaches can yield, allows for alternative ways of seeing the problems and questions. Inter-disciplinary research has inherent creative tensions and dynamism providing insights that a single discipline perspective could overlook. In this thesis approaches based on policy discourse are combined with work on social construction of technologies and actor networks to make analytical connections between framing of political problems and materiality of processes and relationships.

E-democracy has generated wide academic interest. Previous research on government use of digital technologies for democratic participation has considered how the use of the Web might affect political systems (democratic or otherwise). Other work has looked at the role of technologies in citizen led activism and protest. The quality and quantity of online democratic input has been discussed and a large body of work has critically examined specific instances of e-democratic projects. A further branch of research has made comparisons of e-democracy approaches and projects between different countries. From other perspectives, the enactment of technology within government organisations (predominantly in studies of e-government) has also been the subject of academic research.

Much of the literature on democratic theory and participation emphasised the centrality of deliberation in citizen participation. There is an underlying assumption that meaningful participation involves an element of deliberation. The significance of deliberative approaches,

particularly in the government's first phase of e democracy should not be underestimated but deliberation is only one aspect of what is shaping evolving forms of e-democracy. The findings of the thesis suggest that policy actors incorporated varying approaches towards deliberation; some retained a strong preference for deliberative forms of e-democracy while others were more sceptical or focused on the networked, problem solving potential of social media platforms or the release of government datasets.

The thesis has established that e-democracy is not one thing but many things, aimed at different policy concerns and different publics. It can only be fully understood by exploring the situational contours and contexts of the social processes (Mason, 2006: 16). I investigated how policy actors understand participation and democracy, their perceptions of technologies and use within government, as well as exploring how the organisational environment mediates and frames policy actors' relationships, to the public, to politicians and to each other. Through talking with and observing the people who were deeply enmeshed in making e-democracy happen I sought to understand their world. I explored their values and beliefs, the meanings that they assigned to processes and practices and their motivations, as well as what enabled or constrained them. The purpose of this approach to the research was to provide explanations about the complexities of e-democracy (or e-democracies) and in doing so to reveal both its limitations and potential. By focusing on e-democracy, the thesis aims to contribute more widely to discussions on government attempts to widen meaningful citizen participation in policy making. This has been suggested as the most pressing challenge facing contemporary polities, the most elusive aspect of democracy in practice (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 2).

7.4 Addressing different audiences

These findings could be of interest to a number of different audiences. Writing is a process that implicitly has an audience or several in mind.

> When we write - and hence inscribe certain preferred interpretations in our books, dissertations and papers – we do so with an implied audience of readers
>
> (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 118)

My primary audience, as this is an academic study, is other academics. I have used a sociological approach to explore the social worlds inhabited by e-democracy policy actors. Mason suggests that the task of qualitative explanation is one that constructs a perspective, an interpretation or a line of reasoning or analysis (Mason, 2002: 173). The temptation is to provide solutions to the implicit problems of e-democracy. I have endeavoured to avoid

categorical statements in favour of showing that what happens is often messy, contradictory and unexpected rather than planned and rational.

This research is in part a study of how the phenomenon of e-democracy came to be. The story behind it is of anxiety about democracy and an optimism about emerging technologies combined with a political perception of public participation in the modernisation of government. All this is situated in a particular time and context. As new uses of technologies emerged and political thinking moved in new directions, what was e-democracy also changed, mutating into different forms and understandings. At the same time the research investigated how e-democracy was enacted, how it worked. This involved close attention to the context in which activities were situated and to the relationships between actors to map and understand the outcomes which emerged as a consequence and the implications for developing practices.

This twofold approach began with the research question and continued with the data generation and data analysis which were developed in a dialectical process. I moved between the data from the empirical research, my own experiences and broader sociological and political explanations. I engaged with network and discourse approaches as a means of understanding the discursive constructions of e-democracy and to examine the outcomes of multiple actors' connections and process in particular contexts. This process has illuminated the relationship between language and practice. It feeds into wider questions about democratic participation in policy and decision making, the significance of organisational context and of enactment of technologies, as well as the question of governance, the implications for implementation and for democratic accountability.

However my situation as a civil servant has also led me to consider policy makers as an audience. In this regard, I am mindful of Silverman's warning that qualitative research has rarely had much appeal to civil servants and administrators, who are geared to focus on numbers and the bottom line (Silverman, 2005: 365). More generally, despite the interest from policy makers in academic research and the willingness to engage from academia, research utilisation in policymaking is not usually a straightforward or non-problematic process (Stoker, 2010: 48). Yet to find terms on which to engage would in the long term be beneficial in finding solutions to 'wicked' problems (Sorensen and Torfing, 2011: 843). It should be possible to intervene in public debates, offering tentative solutions to problems and at the very least helpful insights to frame public discussion about the scope and limitations of where solutions might be found (Stoker, 2010: 50).

This thesis has a normative underpinning. There is an implicit judgement in evaluating the progress of e-democracy to date and its potential in the future. By acquiring a deeper

understanding of how the policy is framed and implemented, opportunities for intervention can be made that could increase its reach and impact. One of the respondents alluded to this by suggesting that while finding ways to apply democratic participation in decision making does not necessarily make policy *better* (as that is a value judgement and subject to contestation) it could demonstrably make policy *fairer*. Appendix E seeks to foster connections between academic research and policy making with regard to e-democracy.

A third audience is that of practitioners, who may overlap with both academics and policy makers. Using the example of health, Bloor argues that practitioners are often willing audiences for social research and that real opportunities for influence lie with practitioners rather than policy makers because while practitioners do not always have the autonomy to develop new services they do have the autonomy to modify everyday practices (Bloor, 2011: 410, 413). Governance driven democratisation has increasingly resulted in the development of spaces for citizen participation, on and offline, commissioned by government but carried out by participation practitioners working in the private or non-profit sectors who are commissioned to design, manage and deliver these processes (Cooper and Smith, 2012: 2). My research found that practitioners often worked closely with digital enthusiasts and innovators because they saw opportunities for creative citizen participation. Their experience with how such initiatives work or fail to work and their relationships with government organisations provides valuable insights for both policy makers and academics.

I have imagined and addressed three different audiences in ways which highlight the positions that the audiences occupy and what each might look for in the research. The distinction between academics, policy makers and practitioners rather glosses over the connections and mediation that exist between the different groups and the hybridity of processes and practices. It nevertheless illuminates something important about their roles and my approach to them.

7.5 Final thoughts

So what is the future direction for e-democracy? Many of the respondents in my research quibbled with the term 'e-democracy', preferring to set digital mechanisms within the wider context of public engagement. However, discussions over terminology aside, interest in what democracy looks like, how it could operate and the use of technologies in enhancing democratic participation remains very much alive.

There has been recurrent discussion on the merits of invited or uninvited spaces for public discussion (Bherer et al., 2014: 1). Formal institutionalised spaces directly link with decision-makers but may be subject to co-option and instrumentalisation by public officials and

politicians. Governments are reluctant to expand the scope for public deliberation if it threatens institutional representation (Coleman and Moss, 2013: 15). Citizen led spaces allow for more spontaneous and wide-ranging discussions but have little formal connection to decision-making processes. The distinction between institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms of citizen participation seems to suggest that institutionalised forms are always disempowering and tokenistic but this conclusion is too stark and pessimistic. Even where the scope for citizen participation appears limited, there are tactics to be tried and alliances to be built (Cornwall, 2004: 9). My thesis shows that empowerment can flourish in unexpected ways and through what policy actors bring or take away from the encounter at different levels.

What lessons for democratic participation and empowerment in decision making could be learned from the use of technologies in other spheres of government? For reasons explained in the thesis, governments have tended to prioritise innovation in service delivery and transparency measures. Often academic and practitioner debate suggests that these endeavours compete with e-democracy but while there is a concern about competing resources, my research has indicated that the same policy actors work across all these spaces so their energies and attention could be used to enhance innovation in e-democracy rather than depleting it. This is an area in which further research is needed. Governments' approach to e-democracy is often rather heavy handed in its attempts at technological innovation and creativity. Rather than attempting top down means of connecting with citizens, governments should be looking for ways to harness the 'informational exuberance' of Web 2.0 (Chadwick, 2009 :11). Finding ways to link small interventions, networked effects or amplified conversations of online citizen activity to decision making processes in government, could provide new opportunities and energy for interaction, innovation and learning.

Analysis in this thesis has shown that e-democracy is a socio-technical construction. It is a complex interplay of politics, policies organisational processes, uses and understandings of technologies and of what democratic participation means in particular contexts. Bringing together the understanding of how e-democracy has been discursively constructed within wider discourses and the way in which actors relate and connect to produce outcomes has revealed that e-democracy can be defined as a consultative response or means of assessing opinions but it has the potential to enable more effective and meaningful democratic participation. E-democracy may have not have lived up to original expectations yet it will remain an important focus for further study since the challenges of finding new ways to connect citizens to political elites continues to be pressing.

Appendices to the thesis

Appendix A **Interview schedule**

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR INNOVATORS

The interviews will focus on the relationships of senior shapers of policy or innovators to the bureaucratic organisation, to citizens and to politicians. They will look at how ideas get adopted and what influences perceived success or failure. The interviews will be semi-structured around the following questions:

1. What departments or areas of government have been influential in leading the e-democracy agenda? Are there parts of government that have not pursued the agenda as much and if so, why do you think that is?

2. What policies or projects have been particularly exciting or innovative in their use of technology and in the engagement of citizens?

3. Has the department tended to use particular technologies? How do online methods of engagement get selected?

4. What are the barriers or difficulties for the government/department in taking forward the e-democracy agenda?

5. What do you think is the future for citizen/public online engagement with government policy development?

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR IMPLEMENTORS

The interviews will focus on the experiences of making digital engagement work and will look at the concerns and views of those that work directly on engagement projects, as well as the relationships and networks they are involved with. The interviews will be semi-structured around the following questions:

1. What does the department do with the responses it receives?

2. How does the online project connect with the wider policy area?

3. What are the barriers or difficulties in setting up new projects and in running them?

4. Who do you work with on the project (internally and externally)?

5. What is the most successful project you can think of in developing online citizen engagement? What were the less successful projects and why?

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR CONSULTANTS

The interviews will focus on those who design digital engagement projects for policy officials, looking at what informs their choices and the impact of relationships with officials and departments (or divisions within departments). The interviews will be semi-structured around the following questions:

1. How was the technology involved in this project chosen? How was the design agreed and developed?

2. What new or other digital technologies do you think government could use in engaging citizens?

3. What are your relationships with the policy officials? How are difficulties resolved?

4. What projects do you think have worked successfully and what projects have been less successful? What makes projects successful and what makes them fail?

Appendix B **Ethics application**

ETHICS SUBMISSION

September 2011

ETHICS COMMITTEE APPLICATION FORM

Please note:

- **You must not begin your study until ethical approval has been obtained.**
- **You must complete a risk assessment form prior to commencing your study.**

1. **Name(s):** Mary Houston

2. **Current Position:** PhD Student, Sociology and Politics

3. **Contact Details:**

   Division/School: Sociology and Social Policy

   Email mh3g09@soton.ac.uk

   Phone 07779 299707

4. **Is the proposed study being conducted as part of an education qualification (e.g., PhD)**

   Yes X☐ No ☐

5. **If Yes, state name of supervisor (the supervisor should complete the declaration at the end of this form)**

   Susan Halford, Professor of Sociology

   Graham Smith, Professor of Politics

6. **Title of Project:**

An exploration of the factors which influence policy actors' interaction with government initiated online citizen engagement in the policy process

7. **What are the proposed start and end dates of the study?**

   November 2011 – July 2016

8. Briefly describe the rationale, study aims and the relevant research questions

The web is deeply embedded in all aspects of daily life. It is therefore unsurprising that policy actors also use the web as a means of engaging citizens on policy issues. The UK government approach was, initially, largely shaped by their anxiety about the 'democratic deficit'. From this perspective, e-democracy was seen as a technological solution to facilitate greater democratic involvement in the policy process. It is not clear whether this objective has been achieved. Previous research has focused more on questions of participation: who takes part and who is excluded, the level of participation, the quality of the debate and the impact on citizens as a result of their participation. There has been much less investigation about the impact of online interaction on policy actors and the potential consequences for future online engagement.

The aim of my research project is to investigate what happens as a result of interaction between policy actors and citizens in the context of government invitations to citizens to engage online in policy issues? In particular, what influences public officials in their attempts to engage citizens online and in their responses to citizen activity? What are their motivations and the barriers or constraints? How do relationships between officials within and between organisations affect responses to online engagement? And are officials' responses and/or behaviours changing as web technology and the use of the technology develops?

The research questions are:

- How do policy actors conceive of democratic qualities of the web in the context of citizen participation in policy making?
- What are their expectations from citizen engagement? What are their motivations in seeking greater engagement and what are the risks and constraints that are placed on policy actors? How do they deal with change, for example, a change in administration?
- To what extent and in what circumstances do policy actors use the responses gained from online activity in the policy making process? How does the use of web 2.0 technology connect the knowledge, experience and desire of citizens to be involved with the complexity of the decision-making process?
- What is the impact of different technological choices for policy actors' engagement with and responses to citizens? Who makes these choices and what does that say about the relationships between different groups of policy actors and between policy officials and citizens?
- How is the traditional administrative culture – based on hierarchy, rules and division of departmental responsibilities, adapting to the web environment characterised by interactivity, networking and distributed activity?
- What are the broader influences on policy actors that shape their responses to online citizen activity? What are the inputs from other governments, business, commerce and media corporations, as well as the voluntary and community sector?

9. Briefly describe the design of the study

The research project will use qualitative research methods to trace how web technology use alongside analysis of complex connections and divisions in political and administrative systems interacts with and shapes the responses of policy actors to citizen activity; it will look at power relationships between different groups; and the influence of the broader business, media and social environments. The interplay of these factors may have significant consequences for the democratic relationship between citizens and policy actors which are not yet fully understood.

The design of the study is based on:

Semi-structured interviews with three groups of policy actors: (a) innovators and policy shapers; (b) implementers and operators and (c) technical and/or communication experts. The initial participants would help identify those who are more directly involved in the projects. I would also undertake **Documentary analysis** of official and publicly accessible material, in particular guidance documents for civil servants and policy papers (discussion or policy papers, reviews and reports) and I would keep a **Twitter diary** over a period of 18 months to two years by following key tweeters and analysing emerging ideas, practices, and relationships. Over the same period, I will monitor the use of e-democracy channels by conducting a snap-shot analysis every three months of the channels being used and recording what gets used most, which departments use the widest range; and whether changes can be seen over time in use.

Who are the participants?

Civil Servants in central government departments and senior government advisors

11. How will they be identified, approached and recruited to the study?

(please attach a copy of the information sheet if you are using one)

The participants will be identified in a number of ways. The first group of participants (the innovators) have a public profile and have been identified through publicly accessible documents or online or through my contacts in the civil service. The design of the study is based on this first group of participants identifying the second (and possibly in some cases the third) group of participants. The second group would then identify the technical and communication specialists who work on the design of the projects. The initial approach would be to the Permanent Secretaries of the departments where participants are located. Their permission would be sought to approach participants for interviews. Information sheets for the organisation and for those being interviewed are attached as Appendices 1

and 2. Once permission is granted, emails will be sent to the first group of participants to recruit them to the study (Appendix C)

12. How will you obtain the consent of participants?

(Please attach a copy of the consent form if you are using one)

Participants will be sent an information sheet about the study. This will give them to opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns. Once they have agreed to take part will sign a consent form.

13. Is there any reason to believe participants may not be able to give full informed consent? If yes, what steps do you propose to take to safeguard their interests?

There is no reason to believe that participants will not be able to give full informed consent.

14. If participants are under the responsibility or care of others (such as parents/carers, teachers or medical staff) what plans do you have to obtain permission to approach the participants to take part in the study?

Not applicable.

15. Briefly describe what participation in the study will involve for study participants. Please attach copies of any questionnaires and/or interview schedules to be used

Participation will involve an informal (semi-structured) interview on a one-to-one basis. The interview will be last about an hour and will be audio-recorded. A copy of the interview schedules is attached (Appendix A)

16. How will it be made clear to participants that they may withdraw consent to participate at any time without penalty?

The consent form states that participants can withdraw consent to participate at any time, without penalty. This will be repeated before the interview commences.

17. Detail any possible distress, discomfort, inconvenience or other adverse effects the participants may experience, including after the study, and how this will be dealt with.

It is unlikely that the interviews will cause participants any distress. There is a time commitment involved which may cause some inconvenience but I will be flexible about scheduling appointments.

18. How will participant anonymity and confidentiality be maintained?

To avoid participants being identified I will ensure that the published research report does not contain information which is traceable to any one individual by changing details such as age and gender and also not attributing quotes to a named individual (unless they have waived their right to anonymity).

The 'innovators' are senior officials or advisors who have a public profile and will be accustomed to speaking publicly about the issues they are being interviewed on. Some of this group may want their views to be attached to their names rather than their identities being protected. In this situation, the solution would be to offer confidentiality if they wish but also allow them to waive it. My responsibility will be to ensure that they understand the implications of being identified in the research. I will ensure that they are aware that they have the right during the interview to request any specific comments to be 'off the record'.

19. How will data be stored securely during and after the study?

Data collected during the research project will be stored on password protected computer systems and hard copies will be kept in locked cabinets.

20. Describe any plans you have for feeding back the findings of the study to participants

In the organisation information sheet, I have offered to feedback findings to the department. Participants will be offered the chance to factually correct a transcription of their interview and also to receive a summary report of the research findings.

21. What are the main ethical issues raised by your research and how do you intend to manage these?

The main ethical issue that could potentially arise is that some participants may express views that run counter to the departmental or government approach and although it is a very small risk, this could be detrimental to their career. As already discussed their confidentiality can be maintained in the published report, although it may be more difficult to avoid their identities being discovered internally. I will manage this risk by checking that participants are completely aware that they do not have to answer questions

they feel uncomfortable about. I will also ensure that I obscure their identities as much as possible in all my dealings with other interviewees and with the organisation.

22. Please outline any other information you feel may be relevant to this submission

I am currently working as a civil servant in a central government department which could potentially affect how some participants view me. To counter this, I will at all times stress my role as a PhD student at the University of Southampton. I am not using my employment status as a means of gaining access.

Please include your research proposal with this form

The research proposal is attached:

Supervisor/Grant-holder Declaration

I have discussed this application with the applicant and support it.

Any further comments:

Name:

Date:

ETHICS ACCEPTANCE

15/11/2011

Dear Mary

I am pleased to let you know that your recent ethics committee application on 'An exploration of the factors which influence policy actors' interaction with online citizen engagement in the policy process' has been awarded ethical approval (REF SSEGM-08). This email will be evidence of approval from the Faculty Ethics Committee.

This research falls into category B.

We wish you every success with your research.

Best regards,

Martina

Faculty of Social and Human Sciences
University of Southampton
16 July 2012

Mary Houston
PGR student
Sociology and Social Policy

Mh3g09@soton.ac.uk

Amendment to original ethics application

My research project; 'An exploration of the factors which influence policy actors' interaction with online citizen engagement in the policy process' was awarded ethical approval in November 2011.

Since then I have been conducting my research through interviews with civil servants. However, as the research has progressed, I have become aware of a group of civil servants who meet on a monthly basis to discuss digital engagement. This group represents an important source of information and would also provide access to people relevant to my research. I would like to make an application amending my original submission to add participant observation to the research methods.

I have attended two meetings so far and I have spoken to the meetings convenor to check that she is willing to let me attend. I have also briefly spoken to the group about my role as a researcher. I have been invited to make a more substantial presentation about my research to the group later this year and this would be an opportunity to invite people to participate in the research. There is also value in attending the meetings to observe members of the group and listen to their discussions.

With regards,

Mary Houston

UNIVERSITY OF Southampton
School of Social Sciences

Organization Consent Form

Mary Houston School of Social Sciences, University of Southampton
University Road, Highfield SO17 1BJ
Tel: 07779 299707 Email: mh3g09@soton.ac.uk

I, _____, give consent on behalf of the organization

_____ to participate in the research project, *Online citizen engagement in the policy process*, being undertaken by Mary Houston, PhD student at the University of Southampton.

Please tick each box below to demonstrate your consent on behalf of the organization above to participate in this research:

☐ I consent to the researcher approaching staff members to take part in interviews

☐ I understand that data from this project will be stored securely on password protected computers. All paper work will be kept in locked filing cabinets.

☐ I understand that I can withdraw the organization from the study at any time without penalty

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which you may keep.

_____	_____	_____
Participant's name	Participant's signature	Date

_____	_____	_____
Researcher's name	Researcher's signature	Date

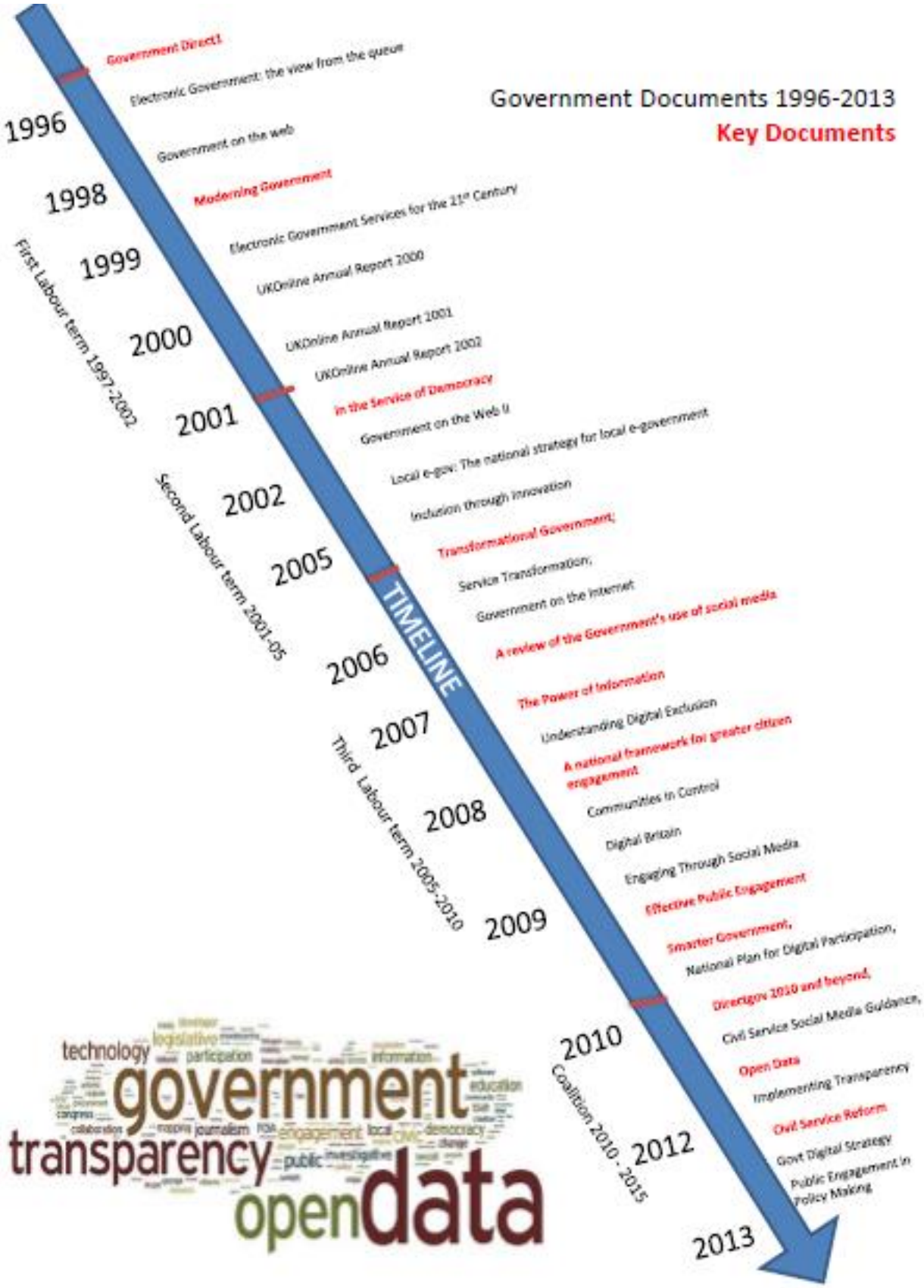
This research project has ethical approval form the University of Southampton SSEGM Ethics Committee. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please contact the supervisors of the project:

Susan Halford, Professor of Sociology
Email: susan.halford@soton.ac.uk

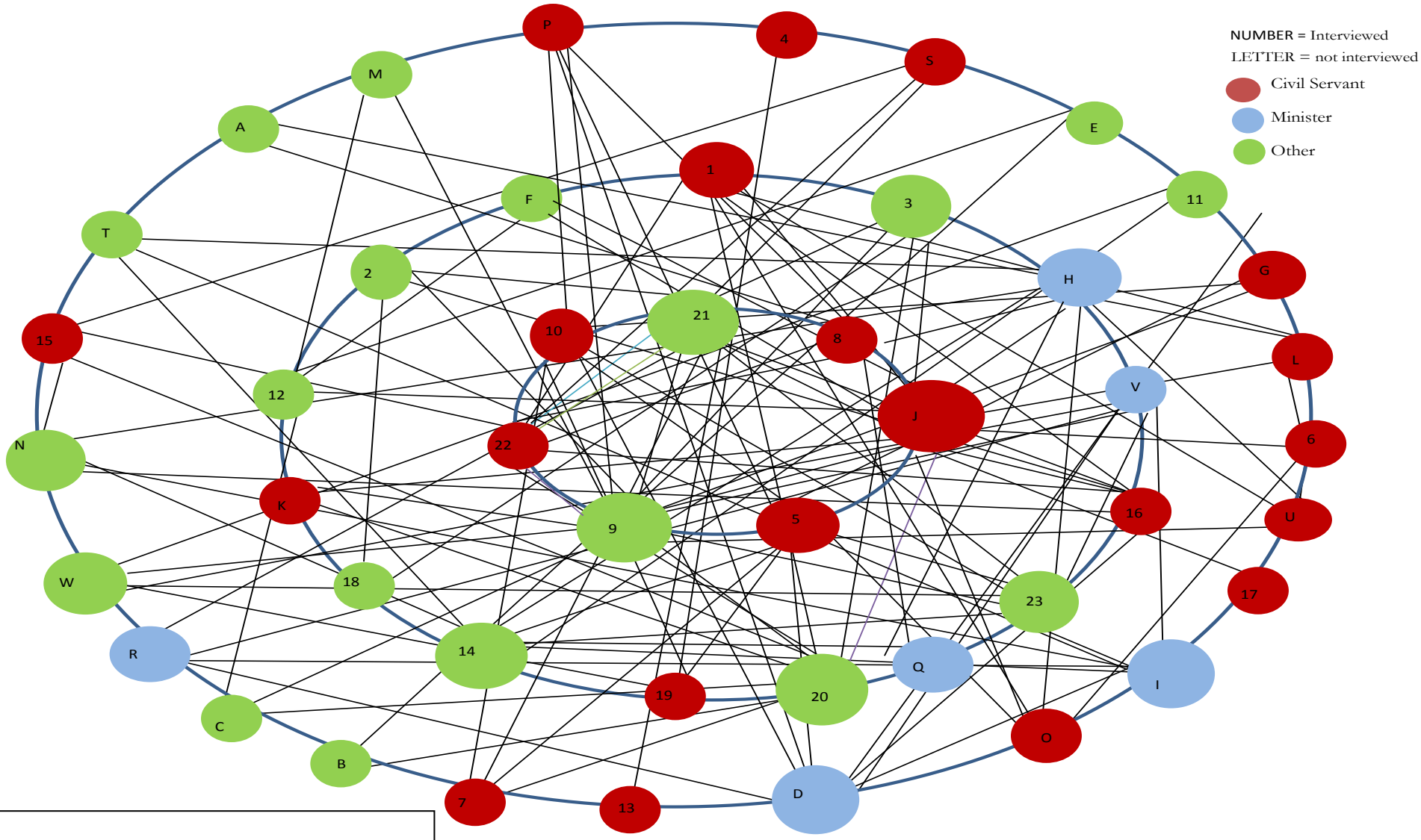
Graham Smith, Professor of Politics
Email: G.M.Smith@soton.ac.uk

17/11/2011

Appendix C **Government documents**



Appendix D **Connections**



Connections through mentions in interviews and participant observation

Appendix E Connecting research with policy making

How policy-makers engage with academics (and *vice-versa*) is both a current 'hot' topic and a perennial problem (Talbot and Talbot, 2015: 187). There are significant challenges to be faced in joining together knowledge and practice effectively. In many cases there is unlikely to be a direct linear link between specific pieces of academic research and changes in public policy but there is scope for research to have at least some incremental impact on the broader policy debate. Policy-makers in Whitehall, either individually or collectively, seek engagement with academics although the extent varies across policy areas.

A major factor that contributes to poor research-policy connections is the apparent communication gap between researchers and policymakers. Perhaps social scientists also need to pay attention to the imperatives of policymaking systems (Stoker, 2010: 55) and to consider what can be done to foster stronger, more durable and productive connections. Based on what policy makers, practitioners and academics have told me during the course of my research I offer the following suggestions to link online (and offline) citizen participation more firmly with developments in policy:

1. There needs to be more clarity about the purpose of the participation sought for specific policies or stages of policies. What are you asking about and who are the people you think would be of most use (without excluding those who fall outside of that group but still have something to say). What will you do with the contributions that you receive?
2. Integrate online and offline participation. It is possible to do engagement in different ways at different points of the policy. You don't need to engage everyone all of the time or only online. At some points it might be about getting large numbers to respond and at other times it may be more appropriate to look for smaller numbers but deeper involvement.
3. Closing the loop: policy makers need to show responsiveness to contributions, demonstrate value and build trust. Citizens are often unwilling to contribute because they are sceptical that their views will be taken into account. As one of the respondents said:

> I don't mind if I say to you that I'd like this room to be painted green and you consult 100 other people and the majority want red. I come in and say 'I wanted it green' and you say well lots of people wanted it red. I'll buy into that, I might not agree but I'll still buy into it. You have to link back to

what I've said and show me how it links in and then you have to show me what you did.

Fiona, Consultant

4. There are ways to handle complexity. Citizens can also contribute to difficult or divisive problems. Practitioners often have experience and creativity in managing different types of input including deliberation, story-telling or problem solving. Design of an initiative matters. How will it be publicised, what will the site allow participants to do – make comments, discuss ideas, offer solutions, talk to each other? Are moderators needed to facilitate discussions and provide information?
5. Building closer connections between policy officials and those who work on digital developments. One of the findings of the research was that policy officials know about policy but do not always understand the uses and effects of web technologies in policy contexts. Equally those who work on design digital projects may not have the full understanding of policy complexities. Outsourcing the technical bits adds in discontinuities and confusions to the process. The objective properties of technologies are less significant than how the technologies are understood and used.
6. Consider the possibility of a hybrid participative solution situated in between direct access to policy makers and independence from government through the creation of autonomous public organizations. This would allow protection from political interventions and allow trust and expertise to be built up.

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