

Explaining the Failure of an Online Citizen Engagement Initiative: The Role of Internal Institutional Variables

Andrew Chadwick

ABSTRACT. This article presents an exploratory case study based on fieldwork consisting of in-depth, semistructured interviews and group discussions with administrative, legal, political, and technology staff involved in an online citizen engagement initiative in “TechCounty,” a pseudonymous U.S. local government authority operating in one of the most favorable sociodemographic and technological contexts imaginable. In contrast with many of the dominant approaches in the literature, the article reveals how a rich, complex, and sometimes surprising array of internal institutional variables explains the initiative’s failure. The article highlights the fragile and uncertain adoption of online engagement by public organizations and the significance of this study’s method for building theory and guiding future research.

KEYWORDS. Citizen engagement, democracy, e-democracy, governance, Internet, online consultation, online forums, organizations, public services

Interviewer: Have you been pleased with the way that the online forum has developed?

Senior IT manager: Actually, I’ve been very disappointed in the fact that it has not been successful. But the reasons for that are not intrinsic to the forum itself.
—*Interview, senior IT manager*

The scholarly literature exploring the Internet, governance, and democracy has grown at a remarkable rate. Yet detailed case

studies that examine internal institutional variables are still surprisingly rare. Data gleaned from “insiders”—politicians, public officials, and technologists working in institutional settings whose attitudes, shared meanings, resources, interactions, and decisions play crucial roles in the design, implementation, or deflection of democratic organizational change—are thin on the ground. These data should arguably have a stronger presence in attempts to understand technology-shaped political change.

Andrew Chadwick is Professor of Political Science and Co-Director of the New Political Communication Unit at Royal Holloway, University of London.

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Address correspondence to: Andrew Chadwick, New Political Communication Unit, Department of Politics and International Relations, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX, United Kingdom (E-mail: andrew.chadwick@rhul.ac.uk).

This article presents an exploratory case study based on fieldwork consisting of in-depth, semistructured interviews and group discussions with administrative, legal, political, and technology staff involved in an online citizen engagement initiative in “TechCounty,” a pseudonymous U.S. local government authority operating in one of the most favorable sociodemographic and technological contexts imaginable. In contrast with many of the dominant approaches in the literature, I reveal how a rich, complex, and sometimes surprising array of internal institutional variables explains the initiative’s failure. I also highlight the fragile and uncertain adoption of online engagement by public organizations and the significance of this study’s method for building theory and guiding future research.

THE INTERNET, GOVERNANCE, AND DEMOCRACY: EXISTING RESEARCH STRATEGIES

The literature on information and communication technologies and politics is now voluminous. Here I discuss only those studies where there are links between technologies, policy-making, and administrative or political institutions. To date, the scholarly literature exploring these phenomena has rested upon four dominant research strategies.

First, there are macro-theoretical studies that seek to generate models and hypotheses to guide and stimulate further investigation. Interpretive discussions of a wide range of illustrative examples of how new communication technologies may be reconfiguring traditional democratic functions such as representation and participation or the policy contexts for institutional change feature prominently in this field (Beynon-Davies & Martin, 2004; Borins & Brown, 2007; Chadwick, 2003; Chadwick, 2009; Chadwick & May, 2003; Coleman, 2004; Coleman, 2005; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dawes, 2009; Grönlund, 2003; Layne & Lee, 2001; Lazer & Mayer-Schönberger, 2007; Margetts, 2008; Parvez & Ahmed, 2006; Vedel, 2006).

Second, there are studies that rely upon the observation and analysis of publicly accessible technological artifacts, particularly the features of government Web sites. These typically aim to quantify potential effects, such as increased efficiency, accountability, transparency (Justice, Melitski, & Smith, 2006), and interactivity (Hands, 2005; Haug, 2008; Pratchett, Wingfield, & Polat, 2006). Some of this work compares nations (Rose, 2005; Wohlers, 2009; Wong & Welch, 2004), or, more often, units of government within nations. In common with the macrotheoretical studies, this branch of the literature is often influenced by narratives of linear progress and norms of public sector performance (Janssen, Kuk, & Wagenaar, 2008; West, 2008) borrowed from the “stages of growth” developmental discourse prevalent in the literature on e-government. A significant sub-branch correlates data in the public domain regarding the characteristics of subnational political or administrative units, for example, with public Web site attributes. Common political and administrative variables include the following: jurisdiction, budget, political structure, partisanship, population characteristics, levels of administrative and legislative professionalization, attitudes toward innovation, and institutional information technology capacity. Common Web site variables include these: levels of use by the public, financial transactions, information disclosure, responsiveness, and the encouragement of citizen participation in shaping services and policy (Baldersheim & Øgård, 2008; Conroy & Evans-Cowley, 2006; Coursey & Norris, 2008; Edmiston, 2003; Gauld, Gray, & McComb, 2009; McNeal, Tolbert, Mossberger, & Dotterweich, 2003; Moon, 2002; Moon & Norris, 2005; Norris & Moon, 2005; Scott, 2006; Sriramesh & Rivera-Sánchez, 2006; Tolbert, Mossberger, & McNeal, 2008; Torres, Pina, & Acerete, 2006; Van Den Haak, de Jong, & Schellens, 2009; West, 2005). Some work in this camp uses insider data (of a sort) collected through structured questionnaires aimed at public officials (Åström & Granberg, 2008; Ho, 2002; Reddick & Frank, 2007).

The third branch of literature brings to the forefront variables that shape the capacities

of individuals to become politically engaged online. Here, the emphasis is on explanations for online participation in government consultation exercises, such as how access to, and use of, the Internet interacts with socioeconomic status (Edmiston, 2003; McNeal, Hale, & Dotterweich, 2008; Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003; Thomas & Streib, 2003). This approach also encompasses attitudinal motivations and constraints such as citizens' trust (Carter & Bélanger, 2005; Sweeney, 2008; Welch & Fulla, 2005), consumer satisfaction (Asgarkhani, 2005; Morgeson & Mithas, 2009; Thomas & Streib, 2003, 2005), beliefs about Web site usability (Streib & Navarro, 2006), privacy (Krueger, 2005), information-seeking (Reddick, 2005), or civic-mindedness (Dimitrova & Chen, 2006; Thomas & Streib, 2005). Almost all of this branch of the literature is based on opinion surveys, though there are exceptions, including emerging experimental studies (Escher & Margetts, 2007) and studies that use focus groups and experimental observations of individuals' interactions with Web sites (Cullen & Herson, 2006a, 2006b).

Finally, there is a body of work that focuses on the discursive, structural, and motivational factors in online interactions between citizens, or between citizens and government. This literature focuses on the location, quantity, and quality of engagement, where quality is most often judged against ideals such as participatory, deliberative, or discursive democracy, with an eye to how policy decisions or technological environments, such as e-mail contact, information tools, discussion forums, or blogs encourage or hinder the cultivation of norms (Edwards, 2008; Jensen, Danziger, & Venkatesh, 2007; Macintosh, Robson, Smith, & Whyte, 2003; Schlosberg, Zavestoski, & Shulman, 2007; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; Whyte & Macintosh, 2001; Wiklund, 2005; Wright, 2006, 2008; Wright & Street, 2007). More often than not, this kind of approach involves the establishment of normative frameworks for measuring the success or failure of online discourse in promoting political knowledge, social capital, and other resources beneficial to a democratic polity.

THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

The predominance of these four research strategies has arguably led to the neglect of a central challenge for scholars of the role of new communication technologies in contemporary democratic governance: the uncovering of otherwise obscured institutional dynamics that precede the production of public artifacts such as policy statements or the technological affordances of Web sites. This uncovering process requires that we examine and weigh the relative importance of actors' motivations and narratives, their proximate decision-making processes, institutional networks and hierarchies, and the complex interplay of different actors and interests within a given organization. In short, such an approach requires a method that allows us to think *inside* the box.

This article's points of departure are therefore threefold. First, democratic engagement initiatives have been almost universally neglected in the small number of insider studies of the Internet and governance that do exist. Second, the attitudes, shared meanings, resources, interactions, and decisions of insider actors matter a great deal in determining outcomes, and should be incorporated alongside the more familiar variables derived from the measurement of public artifacts. Third, only insider qualitative methods can tap these attitudes, shared meanings, resources, interactions, and decisions. Thinking inside the box enables us to lay bare some of the specific institutional impediments to e-democracy in government settings.

Before proceeding further, a few caveats are in order. A focus on nonpublic variables cannot be expected to do all of the work, and this article should not be mistaken for an attempt to establish such an all-embracing approach. Nor can this article speak to the more general literature on behavior inside government departments or agencies, of which there is plenty. Some of the most ambitious and wide-ranging studies of e-government (not online democratic engagement) make use of interview data, and these contain much information that is valuable for analyzing technological and organizational change (6, 2004;

Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2006; Fountain, 2001; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2002). There has also been something of a recent turn toward qualitative methods in e-government research. Borins's call for "research methodologies to look inside the organizational black box" (Borins, 2004, p. 6) is clearly beginning to have an influence (Bloomfield & Hayes, 2009; Contini & Lanzara, 2009; Fedorowicz, Gelinas, Gogan, & Williams, 2009; Ford & Murphy, 2008; Hardy & Williams, 2008; Ho & Ni, 2004; Kim, Kim, & Lee, 2009; Lee & Kim, 2007; Marston, 2006; Mundkur & Venkatesh, 2009; Tsai, Choi, & Perry, 2009; Wood, Bernt, & Ting, 2009). It would therefore be inaccurate to suggest that insider research strategies are entirely absent from the field. But with a few exceptions (Goodwin, 2005; Macintosh et al., 2003; Mahrer & Krimmer, 2005; Welch & Fulla, 2005; Whyte & Macintosh, 2001, 2003), this latest wave of studies is largely unconcerned with questions of democratic engagement. And among those exceptions, several are based on fieldwork conducted by those directly involved in the design and execution of the initiatives (Macintosh et al., 2003; Whyte & Macintosh, 2001, 2003).

Thus, the central methodological puzzle is that an approach that is so much in evidence in the study of governance more generally has so far been curiously lacking in the area of online democratic engagement, where we might expect it to yield significant findings. Such findings arguably deserve their place alongside those from studies of the public face of e-government.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND DESIGN

This is an exploratory case study. It began from a combination of what Yin's classic work terms "critical" and "extreme" rationales (Yin, 2009, pp. 47–48). It is a critical case because the conditions for producing successful outcomes were assumed to be optimal. It is an extreme case because the contexts of actors' behaviors were unusual. The aim is to demonstrate the utility of qualitative methods for uncovering a wider range and complexity of internal institutional variables. Overall, the case seeks to add a new dimension to existing knowledge, to help

build theory, and to contribute to more holistic explanations for the adoption and nonadoption of technologies for democratic engagement in government settings.

The core preliminary research question was this: Are successful online engagement initiatives more likely when government organizations are situated in favorable sociodemographic and technology-use contexts? Previous research demonstrates that individuals with higher socioeconomic status and greater experience of using information and communication technologies are more likely to use the Internet to enrich their personal, professional, and political network ties, and as a result become socially, economically, and politically engaged online (see, for example, Bimber, 2001; Boulianne, 2009; Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2005; Jung, Qui, & Kim, 2001; Mossberger et al., 2003; Norris, 2001). For the purposes of this present study, the favorable context of TechCounty was well-known and taken as given. The key task therefore was to examine the institutional variables *inside* a government organization experimenting with online engagement in this preexisting context.

From research before conducting the fieldwork, I expected to find substantial evidence of innovation and an expanding program of online engagement based on the success of the first initiative. What I actually unearthed was a complex matrix of actors, interests, narratives, and institutional forces that caused the initiative's premature closure and its designation as a temporary pilot project. What constitutes success in politics can be difficult to define, but the basic operational definition here was the continuation and expansion of the first initiative to involve greater numbers, other departments, and other policy and service delivery areas. This was the consensual definition of success among the actors interviewed. In these self-defined terms, the initiative was a failure. Interpretations of what explained this failure were strong components of actors' narratives.

METHOD AND DATA

TechCounty is one of several pseudonyms and strategies used to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees.¹ Preparation, background

research, and document and Web site analysis took place from December to March; the interviews and group discussions took place in various locations inside county headquarters during late March and early April. A lead contact—a senior e-government coordinator who bridged information technology and administrative functions—was established early in the preparation phase. This person played a local coordinating role for the fieldwork. S/he was provided with a summary of the interview questions and was asked to circulate these to participants in advance of the field visits. Subjects were predominantly, though not exclusively, in senior positions and were chosen to be representative of four main branches of the county organization (administrative, legal, political, and technological), but they also included a senior representative from the private company contracted to provide the technological infrastructure, day-to-day running, and moderation of the online forum. Some of the interviewees were recruited through a small scale snowball sampling strategy in collaboration with the lead contact. Twelve individuals were involved in the interviews and the four group discussions. Interviews were face-to-face, in-depth, and semistructured. Group discussions were semistructured. Apart from one session, all were recorded and fully transcribed. Documents that were gathered consisted of Web archives, internal reports, memos, press releases, and slide presentations.

The approach to the data was interpretive and involved the identification of thematic concepts through the emergent coding of phrases in the transcripts. These were eventually aggregated and placed into the category groups that form the main thematic sections of the analysis below. The free and open source software, TAMS Analyzer, was used for coding the textual data.²

THE TECHCOUNTY ONLINE ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE: CONTEXT AND GENESIS

TechCounty has one of the largest populations of all county governments in its state. At the time of data collection, household Internet

penetration was extremely high, at 81 percent of people over 18 years old (Media Audit, 2006). Real median household income was \$71,765—the highest in the state, and well above the U.S. median of \$44,389 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). The county's territory contains the largest number of technology workers and the second highest number of technology firms of all counties in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Levels of political participation in the November 2004 elections were above the national average, though not by a large margin, at 71 percent of registered voters, and 58 percent of those eligible (California Secretary of State, 2004).

In common with many U.S. state and local governments, at the turn of the century, TechCounty launched its e-government program. The centerpiece was a Web portal that contained directory listings of existing department and elected representatives' Web sites, but it also featured themes for organizing information. Most of these themes involved making back-office databases available to the public (for example, on housing values), or they were based on the "life events" and "transactions" models that have become a staple of e-government "virtual agencies."

As the portal became embedded, senior e-government staff, particularly a recently appointed e-government coordinator, started to look for ways to innovate and extend the virtual agency approach. The e-government coordinator was the initial driver behind the online engagement initiative. With the support of a senior IT manager for the county, the legal staff in the county counsel office, the county executive, and funds granted by the county council, the e-government coordinator approached the social services agency with a proposal to involve citizens in an online discussion and advice forum. The chosen theme was fostering and adoption provision in the county.

The forum had a clear rationale. It was to obtain feedback from citizens' deliberation and information-sharing that could then be used to improve the service, raise awareness of child welfare policy and provision more generally, and increase applications by prospective foster or adoption parents. It was designed as a source of advice and support for parents seeking information.

The publicity value of the initiative was clearly recognized. The aim was to “differentiate [itself] from other government Web sites” (Interview, senior IT manager) and to demonstrate the power of the Internet to open up a process often perceived as opaque and mysterious, while lowering the traditional bureaucratic hurdles to those seeking to become foster or adoption parents. The social services agency had recently received negative media coverage regarding its foster care program. The county council saw this as an opportunity to seize the initiative and present the agency in a more positive light.

The high-tech context of TechCounty was strongly perceived as an important reason for launching the initiative. As a senior IT manager explained:

I think being in TechCounty makes a tremendous difference from many different angles. Certainly, there are heightened expectations that the county government—that TechCounty government—is going to be available, reliable, online—all those attributes. People want to transact business online. They don’t want to drive up to pay a parking fine. They want to be able to pay it, just like they pay their bills on PayPal. We have had focus groups where people have told us that. (Interview, senior IT manager)

Local market research on the “expectations of citizens from the Web, local to TechCounty” clearly played a role in the e-government program, as did the high levels of Internet use: “Certainly, leveraging the Internet—the infrastructure that the Internet has—was a very powerful incentive. It’s there. At the time I started this initiative, 75 percent of the households were online. That’s something we can use.” Indeed, there was a sense of enthusiasm about experimentation:

I love being a guinea pig. I love having the opportunity to do free data testing and pilots. We do that—particularly in the lower end technology like firewalls and anti-spam appliances. We do that all

the time. We are very interested in being in the crucible and experimenting with these. That’s a very positive aspect of being in TechCounty. (Interview, senior IT manager)

The importance of the local context was shared by “DiscussCom,” the private company that ran the forum: “We thought, oh, this will be perfect because people will understand more about what the services are, and what kinds of programs there are, and it will be a showcase because it is TechCounty” (Interview, senior manager, DiscussCom).

The initiative was designed to be an innovative blend of online deliberative engagement and service improvement. It thus sits squarely within a “converged” model of e-government and e-democracy, where citizen opinion is integrated into service design and delivery (Chadwick, 2003, p. 452). Fostering and adoption was deliberately chosen as a theme because it was thought to be “safe.” It was initially perceived to be relatively uncontroversial, unlike other local issues such as the environment or land use, for example. As a member of the legal team put it: “We all recognized that it was a very constrained, narrow, costly (because it’s moderated) model, and so it avoided the hardest questions because it was tailored specifically to avoid them so we could put our toe in the water” (Interview, senior lawyer). These assumptions proved to be only partly correct because the issue turned out to be highly controversial in the context of the internal bureaucratic politics of the county.

The online forum was largely outsourced to DiscussCom, a locally based private technology company that specializes in online engagement projects for private sector companies. The forum ran for a little under a year. Postings were low in number, and there were few discussions. As an illustration, over a nine-month period, there were 15 initial postings in the fostering section, and these received a total of 34 replies. The fostering section was actually one of the more populous areas of the site. Successful applications by prospective foster and adoptive parents did not substantially increase as a direct result of the forum. Due to it being outsourced to a private firm, the financial costs were significant.

The initiative's failure effectively halted the development of online consultation forums in TechCounty.

What explains this outcome? The following section discusses five key sets of variables that emerged from the interviews. They are, in descending order of importance: budget constraints and organizational instability; policy shifts inside the social services agency; political ambivalence among elected representatives; the perception of legal risks that led to a cautious, depoliticized approach; and problems generated by the outsourcing of part of the initiative.

ANALYSIS

Budget Constraints and Organizational Instability

Budget constraints and a concomitant sense of organizational instability are the most important explanations for the initiative's failure. The county administration was enduring a period of extreme financial stringency and a hiring freeze (Interview, administrator #2), partly as a result of a broader statewide budget crisis, but also due to the aftermath of the dotcom crash of the early 2000s, which hit tax revenues. One interviewee vividly described this context:

Well, here's the paradox here. We cut 1000 positions last year. We're cutting another 1200 this coming July, from a total of 16,000. We've reduced our budget by \$280 million last year, another \$200 million this year. Roughly half a billion dollars out of a general fund budget of two billion. They're fairly substantial cuts . . . So our staff's going down, our workload is going up, and so technology is seen as helping that situation out, by providing the automation, by providing access to the information that staff need to do their job . . . that's the kind of productivity savings we need. (Interview, senior IT manager)

The financial squeeze created an unfavorable internal context for projects that could not demonstrate tangible, quickly realizable cost

savings. As an elected representative put it: "A major problem we have is getting a stable, predictable source of revenue" (Interview, councilor). This was reinforced by a chief aide:

We could have one of those big [online] debates. I think it's a financial constraint. The balance between "Do I invest money in information technology that will help me be slightly more efficient in my cost-savings and will be opportunity cost—not hard dollar saving?" versus the position of mental health workers, the nurse, the doctor I can fund. (Interview, chief aide to a councilor)

The generalized context of job cuts and downsizing across the county administration was the most widely shared explanation among all of the interviewees, but was most vividly observed by the senior manager from DiscussCom, the private firm contracted to run the online forum: "Honestly, I don't think you can really at all overstate the extent to which these folks, by and large, didn't know what their job was going to be tomorrow, for months at a time" (Interview, senior manager, DiscussCom).

There were, however, differences of opinion regarding the relative importance of the budget. From the perspective of the e-government team, some departments were using the cuts as a means of deflecting organizational change. This skepticism manifested in deep tensions between the social services agency and the e-government staff.

The county's e-government program was overseen by a small steering committee that consisted of staff drawn from across the agencies. A policy working group was responsible for prioritizing about 20 policy areas, from privacy and the handling of personal information to Web site content and public engagement (Interview, senior lawyer). A senior IT manager from the information services department hand-picked the membership of these bodies, but the e-government team had been unsuccessful in a bid to place a representative in each of the county's departments (Interview, senior IT manager). These small, rather ad hoc structures were required to act as the central coordinating

force for online service delivery and engagement across the entire county. Unsurprisingly, the day to day capacity of these bodies was relatively weak, and this hindered implementation.

Matters were made worse by the fragmented nature of the larger county governments in the United States. A staff of around 15,000, spread across almost 60 departments, was dogged by what a senior IT manager described as the “territorial imperative in each agency” (Interview, senior IT manager). A senior Web technologist concurred: “We have to deal with 56-plus different agencies which all wanted to be treated separately, and yet it’s considered in one county” (Interview, senior Web technologist). Another person went further still:

The governance of this is very difficult. We initially wanted to have an e-government liaison like, say, in every department, and that hasn’t happened, and it is partly because, well, for a couple of different reasons—number one: it’s not always easy to identify who that would be and to find the people who will bring those changes about; number two: people aren’t incentivized, encouraged, to do that; number three: you know, they kind of go, “Oh God, you want me to be on another committee and go to a whole ‘nother set of meetings” and all this kind of stuff. Communication is very difficult here. I mean, one of the things we got dinged for on the initial informatization was, we didn’t communicate enough . . . I did a whole roadshow. I mean, throughout the entire eight months—I would go out to the departments and agencies and pitch, and pitch, and pitch, and pitch and try and build buy-in and all of that stuff . . . (Interview, senior e-government coordinator)

The transition to the unified Web portal during the previous few years had proved controversial. While some departments had been slow to build Web sites, several departments had highly developed sites. Some departments had talented amateurs who devoted significant amounts of time to developing their sites. This context,

characterized by what Ciborra termed *bricolage* or “tinkering”—to capture how new technologies may enable ideas and practices to “bubble up” from below without centralized direction—had led to a series of internal discussions over the design and functionality of the new centralized portal (Ciborra, 2002, pp. 30–53; Interview, Web designer). The e-government program’s weak capacity for implementing decisions is an important part of the explanation for the forum’s failure because it meant that there were few sanctions that could be applied at department level. The typical outcome was that department-level IT managers and non-IT staff tended to deflect suggestions from the e-government team:

Have I come across resistance or resentment? Yes. And it comes from a couple of different areas. Number one: Because ISD is the central IS delivery organization and we support all of these different clients, there are people who, just because of that fact—because we’re centralized; because we’re trying to coordinate more what everybody is doing in this very distributed organization, are going to resent that because we are encroaching on their territory. That’s part of it. (Interview, senior e-government coordinator)

The extent to which this mattered is revealed in the alternative governance structures that were suggested by interviewees. A favored solution involved ending the e-government program’s free-floating nature and situating it more firmly within the county executive’s office, where it would be able to capitalize on the vertical command structure flowing from the executive’s office down through to the department heads and their subordinate middle managers (Interview, senior e-government coordinator).

When it came to the online engagement initiative, this generally weak capacity was laid bare: “The problem is that the initial set of stakeholders that we worked with . . . which should have been the right people, retired, were moved into new positions, were laid off, etcetera, etcetera. We never had the full buy-in of the manager . . .” (Interview, senior e-government coordinator).

And nowhere was organizational instability more keenly felt than inside the social services agency, which was experiencing particularly harsh budget and staff cuts and “a lack of internal time” for the engagement project (Interview, senior IT manager). As a senior Web technologist put it: “There really was no ownership of the [online] community so much . . . I don’t think they had the time or the resource to actually do that and then market it as they should have. I think that’s one of the reasons why it didn’t kick off too well” (Interview, senior Web technologist). This view was shared by a senior member of the county legal team: “If it’s broken, it becomes something that people don’t rely on and so, unfortunately, I think this really visionary project was emerging at a time when the resources that we might apply to it to really kick it up a notch, were dissipating” (Interview, senior lawyer).

Organizational problems inside social services were further complicated by three other factors: the ongoing implementation of a new electronic case management information technology (IT) system, whose adoption was mandated at the state level and over which the county had no control; recent negative media coverage following complaints to the ombudsperson’s office; and a recent large grant from an external charitable foundation that was contingent upon policy changes in the handling of child welfare cases (Interview, senior e-government coordinator).

Policy Shifts

Second in importance to the budget constraints, the relatively weak and fragmented power of the e-government team, and organizational flux inside social services, was a significant policy shift that emerged from within the social services agency—one that hugely contradicted the forum’s original rationale just a few months into the project.

The essence of the problem was this: As part of its ongoing reorganization and the operational changes due to the receipt of grant funding from a charitable foundation, the social services agency changed the basic orientation of its policy on fostering, from finding families in the

community at large toward prioritizing care in the homes of members of a child’s extended family. This was in keeping with new “family-to-family” thinking in the sector, the idea being that children would benefit from greater stability in schooling and local ties. Central to this new approach were local neighborhood centers (Interview, senior e-government coordinator; Interview, senior IT manager).

Based as it was on the importance of face-to-face, family ties, and neighborhood centers, this new approach radically undermined the whole case for an online initiative in this particular area because it conflicted with the policy goals of the agency. The e-government team and DiscussCom proposed reorganizing the forum by adding new private folders and involving neighborhood centers in training, as part of the new approach. In the end, a new public section was added to the forum, but it duplicated effort and presented a confusing structure. By this time, roughly halfway through the initiative, a more dramatic change of course was ruled out on the grounds that it would be too time-consuming and disruptive. As one frustrated person explained: “If you’re at a particular level, there’s so many levels before anything can really be authorized for you to do or change or redo, that you just go, ‘But that will require this, and this, and this . . . ,’ and then you don’t have time to do it” (Interview, senior manager, DiscussCom).

Political Ambivalence

The next set of variables relates to the attitudes of the elected politicians in TechCounty. They claimed to have offered strong backing to the e-government program, and this was exhibited in their authorization of the funds for the online forum. However, the fieldwork revealed a great deal of ambivalence among the councilors toward engaging the public online. One politician stressed the “controlled” genesis of the initiative: “So, this is the way that—how do we figure out how to do this on a scale that will be politically safe? It’s a thing that people actually might join, like foster care” (Interview, councilor). When asked about the importance of the forum, one person replied: “I think it is

more your stand on the various social issues—government efficiency which is related, maybe synonymous—I don't think [the forum] has the same cachet with voters" (Interview, councilor).

One interviewee dismissed online deliberation as a "manufactured process":

I'm having a problem understanding this free for all action because we're trying to accomplish things here, so I don't see us sitting down in a town hall meeting. We have a portion of our meetings which allows people to come in and speak on items that are not agendized (*sic*), to allow for input. I don't think we're ready to make some sort of step to where all issues are resolved by online automatic survey sort of thing. Is that a flavoring of what you're talking about? (Interview, councilor)

Overall, there was a mild but discernible defensiveness on the part of the politicians. This was manifested in two principal ways. First, the forum was dismissed as a sideshow (one representative had trouble recalling it). Second, they typically argued that the established procedures for citizen influence were working well. These were mainly seen as being offline channels, though there was enthusiasm about e-mail contact, primarily because it was seen as a more easily controllable and private form of communication.

Failure to adequately promote the forum was raised by several nonpolitical interviewees. This was a selectively targeted criticism. The forum was publicized on the county's home page for several months and even featured as part of a positive BBC online news story about the county's e-government program. At the same time, however, none of the elected councilors personally promoted the forum on their own Web pages, nor did any of them personally act as a sponsor to raise the profile of the initiative.

Legal Risks and Depoliticization

This political ambivalence fed into legal concerns. The extent to which legal staff shaped the initiative was a particularly surprising finding—such variables have been largely absent from

previous analyses of online engagement (however, see Docter & Dutton, 1998; Wright, 2006). The fears centered mainly upon the need to balance First Amendment rights to freedom of expression against potential liability issues raised by the prospect of public speech in a government-sponsored online forum. They also encompassed concerns about the personal privacy of participants who were themselves foster or adoptive parents, the prospect of county employees using the forum to criticize policy, and digital divide issues. The chosen topic for the forum was itself born out of this legal conservatism: "It is a very constrained way to do it. The way that pilot was set up, it addressed my legal concerns," said one interviewee (Interview, senior lawyer). There was a widespread and strongly held view that the forum's design and regulation should pay close attention to the law on speech and personal information.

This came in the context of a generalized sense of frustration on the part of legal staff who reported facing growing workloads due to recent increases in the number of questions and freedom of information requests received from lobbyists and activists. These increases were largely blamed on the unintended consequences of having placed greater quantities of policy documents, committee minutes, and financial data online. A further factor was a recent case of a relatively senior county employee who had written letters to the local press on the issue of same-sex marriage, which had been signed using an official county title. As one individual put it:

[This concern] is real, and it costs us money to defend and we may win because we didn't authorize it and it violated our rules—but we're still going to have to spend lawyer money on defending lawsuits rather than lawyer money advancing the policy goals of the Board of Supervisors, which is what we'd like to be done. (Interview, senior lawyer)

Despite the very high levels of Internet adoption across the county, concerns were raised about what one interviewee termed the "remaining

15 percent” who would be unable to participate in online deliberation. In a diverse county with many different linguistic communities, there were also worries about the dominance of English in the forum and fears that the county would open itself up to litigation if it did not provide what might prove to be costly translation services.

Unsurprisingly, the legal officers in the county counsel’s office led the charge on these issues, but almost all of the interviewees raised legal questions. A senior IT manager reported that “a lot of issues and concerns, mostly about liability” were initially raised by the county councilors (Interview, senior IT manager). Obviating these risks was a condition of the council’s approval for the project. The county counsel’s office was involved from the beginning in “scoping our online community and determining legally what can we control in terms of the time, place, and manner of input so that we’re not violating people’s First Amendment rights, but also mitigating the potential harm that can be done” (Interview, senior lawyer).

Consider this statement, spoken by a senior lawyer during a group discussion involving the author, a senior lawyer, and a senior IT manager:

I have a concern, as a lawyer, and being conservative. When I’m not wearing my lawyer hat, I see the great potential for communities, groups, chat-rooms—whatever permutation it is—to be a wonderful source, not only of information-sharing, but synergy and change and creativity and all kinds of wonderful things. When it’s hosted by the government . . . you get somebody online that says, “Councilor _____ is the biggest jackass I’d ever met in my life!” And there it sits on the county’s Web site! What do we do? I think we’ve all experienced when things are in writing, and if we’re prosecuting somebody who sends an e-mail, if they’d just picked up the phone and said, “Councilor, I think you’re a big jerk. I hate the way you’ve voted on that issue.” Bam! Well, [the] Councilor may be offended, and it’s over. It’s ephemeral . . . In a

community, it is sitting there. Anybody can come and look at it. So, as a lawyer, it makes me really anxious about how we can allow such a vehicle to be meaningful, while not allowing it to either create legal liability for the county through release of private information that shouldn’t be on there, through potentially libelous or slanderous comments . . . Can government accommodate that kind of thing, or does it have more lasting harm, and is it possibly actionable because we’ve created the opportunity? So that’s my angst on that issue.

These legal concerns had powerful effects on the design, execution, and evaluation of the online forum, dampening enthusiasm about its broader application. The decision to outsource the hosting and day-to-day operations meant that the county could delegate most of the moderation decisions to DiscussCom. This was seen as a means of symbolically distancing the county from the online discussion, but of central importance was the hiring of expertise in moderating online discussions—expertise that the county itself was unable to provide—in order to preempt potential liability issues, rather than any firm legal argument about distancing or noninvolvement. To the outside observer, the forum appeared to be hosted on the county’s Web site. It was branded with the county logo and followed the same visual style as the rest of the site.

While pseudonymous posting was encouraged to avoid participants having to reveal their real names, a set of “community standards” or ground rules for discussion, devised in advance by the legal team and DiscussCom, was clearly displayed on the site. As one interviewee put it, these were designed so that they had:

. . . a minimum of subjective judgment or interpretation so that we could try to minimize the argument that we were discriminating arbitrarily against people’s point of view . . . we did, very explicitly, upfront say “This is not a forum for you to rant and rave about the foster care system and all of its problems. This is a place

for positive discussion and success stories and frequently asked questions and testimonials . . . about fostering and adopting children, and if you have something that is outside the scope of how those community standards are governing the discussions in this area, here is how you can give us that input.” (Interview, senior lawyer)

As it transpired, the forum generated just “one questionable post the entire year” (Interview, senior lawyer). In a limited sense, the choice of subject area, the stringent ground rules, and the outsourcing of moderation were a success. Of course, this outcome was probably just as much a function of the very low volume of postings. Concerns were expressed about recording and aggregating the higher volume of comments that would be generated if more controversial issues, such as local planning and land use regulations, were to be opened up to online deliberation.

The key point about the role of legal concerns in explaining the initiative’s failure is not that the forum encountered serious legal difficulties—clearly it did not. Rather, it was that the general attitude toward risk led to a reluctance on the part of the legal staff to consider a bolder, more obviously “political” subject for online discussion. The initiative was tightly circumscribed from the start. There were so few difficulties because it was a narrow and “safe” subject, which was precisely what the legal officers had wanted. Circular logic, perhaps, but it served the purpose of disarming the supporters of online engagement inside the e-government program, who had seen this as potentially the beginning of a wider movement of online engagement across the county. As one interviewee said: “There is still that tremendous fear that something negative will be said, or something negative will happen” (Interview, senior manager, DiscussCom).

Outsourcing

The final explanation of failure emerges from the outsourcing of the forum. DiscussCom’s sanguine analysis of how it could adapt in the middle of the project (considered in the section on Policy Shifts, above) masked a deeper set of challenges.

DiscussCom is a long-established and commercially successful company specializing in online dialogue and community-building for private sector clients from a wide range of industries, including, for example, personal computer manufacturers, car manufacturers, Internet service providers, online retailers, Hollywood media companies, and food producers. The company was hired early in the life of the initiative and played an important role in the design, implementation, and moderation of the forum. A senior manager at the company took a close interest in the project and was active in attempting to co-opt individuals from within the social services agency who would hopefully act as “champions” for the online engagement exercise and drive the project forward at the middle management and “street level” of the bureaucracy. There was an early meeting of minds between the e-government team and DiscussCom.

But soon after the forum’s launch it became obvious that the number of postings and comments was not what had been anticipated. DiscussCom was having difficulties attracting users to the site, despite it being displayed prominently on the county’s main portal. More serious, however, was a breakdown of communications between DiscussCom and staff working in the social services agency. Major cultural differences between the public and private sectors were cited by both county employees and DiscussCom. As one county employee said:

It just didn’t happen, and . . . side by side—we just tried this, tried that, tried this, tried that, and we never got any traction. I mean, DiscussCom, and _____ in particular—very visionary, articulate, passionate, a great person to work with—and if she couldn’t make it work . . . There’s a combination of two things. Probably one: They don’t understand the sector (I mean, DiscussCom, I’m saying), because they haven’t worked with the sector . . . It’s just a different animal. And number two: The choice [of subject] that we made is not the best choice, in the end, as it turned out. (Interview, senior e-government coordinator)

Meanwhile, DiscussCom argued that the forum lacked clear objectives, a clearly-defined “customer” inside the county bureaucracy, and an awareness of what the forum could provide:

I think, typically, the customer approaches you because they have a need and an objective, and that is exactly what happened here. But then, I needed this other customer over here to be involved, and over there, I never found a customer. So, as a result, I was trying to sell . . . I was always in selling mode rather than implementation! It was like sell, implement, sell, sell. Typically, you have a customer who has this need or this vision, and they’re trying to get this thing done, and you can either help them do it, or you can’t. But in this situation, the customer . . . effectively disappeared. So it was like, now we have a product, but our customer has disappeared on us . . . Of course, we have a lot of media clients, but the media clients are looking for numbers. I mean they just want their buzz. I mean, basically, it’s a little different ROI than _____ is working for. But what they’re looking for is buzz and coolness, and when you talk to them, they’re right with you on brand identity and stuff like that. (Interview, senior manager, DiscussCom)

This lack of experience in dealing with the government sector caused several undesirable outcomes. First, clearly there were different expectations regarding how central the forum was to the social service agency’s way of working. This became especially acute once the major policy shift (discussed above) took place inside the fostering and adoption program and the forum’s rationale started to conflict with the new policy goals. There was some ambiguity concerning the extent to which DiscussCom involved managers from social services in the initial design of the forum. One interviewee described the goals as “very fluid” from the outset (Interview, senior e-government coordinator). Second, there was significant friction over the time it took county employees to respond to what were sometimes technical

questions from citizens regarding the rules relating to fostering and adoption. DiscussCom employees were unable to answer such questions and were reliant upon the time and goodwill of social services staff. DiscussCom expected quick responses, but social services were working with a three-week turnaround. Third, DiscussCom and the e-government coordinator were unable to identify a suitable person inside social services to “champion” the project. Instead, they encountered apathy and sometimes obstruction:

Senior manager, DiscussCom: Really, I think, if its results are disappointing, it is because our strategic vision was here, rather than at social services, and because the strategic vision wasn’t there, then . . . A number of things. One is, the [strategy didn’t go off]. Once I really got over there—and, believe me, I talked to . . .

Senior e-government coordinator: We’ve had so many different sets . . . We went through so many sets of champions . . .

Senior manager, DiscussCom: I mean, what you need, obviously, for something to succeed is for there to be a strategic vision and then the implementers having the objective as part of their management objective to implement and carry out this strategy. We had that here. We didn’t have it there.

Given the harsh financial climate of staff and budget cuts, this reception was unsurprising. DiscussCom’s argument that a successful online forum would become “self-policing” and would eventually generate savings in staff time was understandably difficult to accept from the perspective of social services, given such low volumes of traffic on the site. Some e-government staff complained of a lack of “strategic thinkers” among the county’s middle management and a culture of command and control, where “If you’re not explicitly authorized to do this or chartered with doing this, no-one is willing to sit down and stick their neck out” (Interview, senior e-government coordinator). There were comments regarding resistance to new technology, the importance of training (Interview, senior

Web technologist), low levels of “technological proficiency,” a failure to understand online engagement, and a “complete misunderstanding of the medium” (Interview, senior manager, DiscussCom).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The events in this case study took place in what was, on the surface, a highly favorable context. Among all of the actors involved, there was a genuine sense of the importance of this context in shaping the online engagement initiative, and it was widely perceived that this would make for a successful outcome. Yet the initial research question—whether successful online public engagement initiatives are more likely when government organizations and other relevant actors are situated in favorable contexts—was answered, in this case, in the negative.

As revealed above, the explanation for its failure is a complex matrix of internal institutional variables. Entrenched expectations of the e-government program were mostly about service delivery improvements. The e-government team was free-floating rather than embedded in the county executive’s office and was therefore unable to drive change. Departmental rivalry and different decision-making cultures were in evidence. Ambivalence on the part of elected representatives and liability worries from senior law officers played a subtle but important role in dampening enthusiasm. Technologically aware leadership was lacking where and when it mattered most. There was an eagerness to avoid too much sunlight following recent bad publicity, but there was also a desire to go on the offensive and grab media attention. There was fatigue following an enforced case management IT system implementation in a key agency. A dramatic policy switch came in the middle of the initiative. Insufficient resources inside the county administration meant that the forum was outsourced to a company that had previously only worked with the private sector. Policy goals were only weakly integrated into the design of the initiative. And all of this took place in the fragmented context

of a large U.S. county government experiencing budget cuts and downsizing.

How might this case inform future research? The first point concerns the relationship between structure and agency, and its relevance for appraising online engagement initiatives (for a previous perspective, see Parvez & Ahmed, 2006). The e-government team, DiscussCom, and social services were all enmeshed within a matrix of determinants. None of these three entities had the capacity to dismantle the structural traps that were largely outside of any single individual’s or group’s making. One particularly surprising finding is the extent to which no group of actors seemed able to engage with any meaningful agency to make the project a success. The analysis presented here reveals the importance of actors’ constructions of meaning through narratives of change and resistance to change, but it also reveals that failure can, in a sense, become overdetermined, when such broad, multifaceted constraints are in evidence. Complex institutional structures may trump agency in the overall balance of forces. This case therefore suggests that it may be unwise to overstate the importance of agency. This presents a challenge to the many accounts of the Internet, governance, and democracy that have been framed in terms of decisive interventions by motivated and technologically knowledgeable reformers.

A second point concerns the need to distinguish between variables that are likely to be important in explaining failure in the implementation of e-government programs in general terms and those variables that matter more particularly in the case of online democratic engagement. For example, an important finding of this research is the extent to which a politico-legal nexus of interests inside the county played such a decisive role in depoliticizing the initiative, largely due to fears that it would undermine existing privatized interactions (i.e., citizens’ e-mail contact with councilors), generate legal problems around freedom of expression, and increase workloads for the county counsel. Further research is needed in this area, but it is a reasonable hypothesis that while internal institutional impediments to online engagement will in some cases be similar

to impediments to e-government, in most cases there will be substantial differences between the two. Different constellations of attitudes, shared meanings, resources, interactions, and decisions are present in a government authority when it embarks upon a project that involves increasing the quantity and quality of direct engagement with the public, rather than one that simply reorganizes back-office processes. Indeed, this has been one of the major fault lines of this field of practice since its Internet-fuelled rise in the 1990s (Chadwick & May, 2003). It seems clear, then, that it may be insufficient to simply borrow generalized explanations of public sector information technology implementations. Potential democratization is a different animal.

This provides all the more reason to question the peculiar reluctance on the part of many scholars working in this area to use insider, qualitative data collected in authentic settings. The literature continues to grow at a remarkable rate, but there are still huge gaps in our understanding. These gaps are due in many respects to the kinds of evidence and research designs that have dominated the field. As the introductory section of this article demonstrates, with some notable exceptions, studies have either been macrotheoretical or based on publicly available artifacts such as Web site features or forum interactions, or they have been based on surveys of citizen attributes. When a movement for public sector reform is so obviously “public” in its manifestations, there is an understandable temptation to focus on variables that are more easily identifiable, measurable, and comparable across the public faces of organizational entities. While these approaches have undoubted value, 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. These may provide better explanations. The TechCounty case illustrates the powerful influence of budget constraints and general organizational instability, internal policy shifts, political ambivalence, the perception of legal risks, and the tensions created by outsourcing—forces that the predominant methods in this field have left largely unrevealed. These types of data and these substantive themes could fruitfully be integrated

into theoretical frameworks and tested in future studies.

This leads to a fourth point that can be taken from this case: the importance—or otherwise—of democratizing technologies. There is much to be gained from close analysis of technological affordances, especially when tools and techniques change significantly, as they have over recent years since the emergence of Web 2.0 (Chadwick, 2009). However, while there are undoubtedly many cases in which technologies make a decisive difference to outcomes, the TechCounty case demonstrates that the choice of tools may sometimes be marginal to explanations of success or failure. It is not about taking sides in the debate between social shaping and technological determinism. Rather, it is a matter of remaining open to the idea that in some contexts, such as the one considered in this article, technological variables may sometimes wash out of explanations. Future studies should pay greater attention to assessing the balance between longstanding internal institutional variables and what are often transient periods of technological novelty.

The lessons of this case are clear: Internal institutional variables of the kinds documented here may play a powerful role in determining the outcomes of online engagement in government settings. They have much to contribute toward the complexity, the richness, and even the fidelity, of our explanations.

NOTES

1. The fieldwork, involving public and private sector actors, was conducted by the author on the basis of confidentiality, and the author undertook to protect the anonymity of all participants. As much relevant information as possible is provided without revealing the identities of organizations and subjects. Generic role descriptions are substituted for specific job titles. U.S. county governments use a variety of distinctive names for their elected decision-making bodies, such as board of supervisors or county council; here the most common of these—county council—is used as a generic name. Data were gathered during the mid-2000s.

2. The coding of the transcripts was undertaken solely by the author. The coding frame consists of a mix of hierarchical and nonhierarchical categories (see the Appendix). TAMS (Text Analysis Markup System)

Analyzer is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) application designed for ethnographic research. It facilitates interpretive analysis of large volumes of textual data through a select-and-code interface. It is therefore ideally suited to emergent coding where no prior coding frame exists, as was the case with this study. TAMS is similar to other CAQDAS applications, but it has the unique advantage of being desktop-based, free (as in both beer and speech), open source, and available for the Macintosh. For more information, see <http://tamsys.sourceforge.net> and Weinstein (2006).

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APPENDIX Coding Frame and Frequencies

Category	Frequency
Budget_constraints	29
Forum>Origins	20
TechCounty_context	19
Egovernment_origins	15
Legal>Risks	15
Politicians>Not_interested	15
Explanations_for_failure>Social_Services	14
Forum>Outsourcing	12
Forum>Outsourcing>Public_sector_vs_private_sector	11
Interagency_collaboration	10
Forum>Resources>Moderation	8
Future_plans	8
Politicians>Participation	8
Forum>Rationales	7
Innovation	7
Media_coverage>Negative	7
Organizational_instability	7
Political_enforcement	7
Explanations_for_failure	6
Legal>First_Amendment	6
Coordination	5
Forum>Close	5
Media_coverage>Positive	5
Organizational_culture	5
Department_identity	4
Egovernment>Needs_county_executive_leadership	4
Forum>Digital_divide_as_reason	4
Fragmentation	4
Inertia	4
Interagency_collaboration>Threats	4
Politicians>Interested	4
Social_Services>Not_technologically_aware	4
Social_Services>Policy_switch	4
Efficiency	3
Egovernment>Rationales	3
Forum>Ground_rules	3

(Continued)

APPENDIX (Continued)

Category	Frequency
Forum>Outsourcing>Poor_performance	3
Legal>Privacy	3
Legal>Staff	3
Legal>Technology_makes_difference	3
Legal>Transparency	3
Politicians>Divided	3
Politicians>No_electoral_gains	3
Social_Services>Influenced_by_outside_grant	3
Training	3
Communities_of_interest	2
Communities_of_practice	2
County_executive	2
Explanations_for_failure>Politicians	2
Forum>Ownership	2
IT_capacity	2
Jurisdiction_rivalry	2
Middle_management	2
Administrative_enforcement	1
Centralization>Resentment_toward	1
Channel_rivalry	1
Explanations_for_failure>Fear_of_citizens	1
Extranet	1
Forum>Applications_to_service	1
Forum>Not_representative	1
Forum>Participation_good	1
Forum>Strategic_vision	1
Information_Services_Department_weak	1
IT_staff_not_strategic	1
Legal>Required_procedures	1
Marketing	1
Not_core_business	1
Politicians>Email_not_threatening	1
Politicians>Exaggeration	1
Social_Services>Conflicting_IT_demands	1
Social_Services>Lacks_accountability	1
Technology_not_always_solution	1
Trust	1

Note: Some passages of the interview transcripts were assigned more than one code attribute.