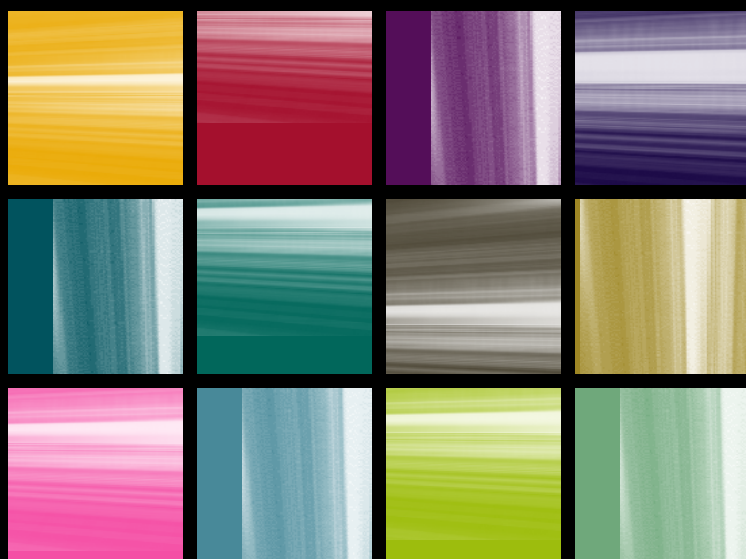# *Bowling Together:*
Online Public Engagement
in Policy Deliberation

By Stephen Coleman and John Gøtze

BT

HANSARD
SOCIETY

Contents

Bowling Together:
Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation
by Stephen Coleman and John Gøtze

Dr Stephen Coleman is director of the Hansard Society e-democracy programme and lecturer in Media and Citizenship at the London School of Economics. Dr John Gøtz is head of section in the e-government group in the Danish State information Service.

Introduction

Stephen Coleman

Two convergent developments are likely to have a profound effect upon the future shape of democracy.

Firstly, there is a growing recognition on the part of many within the developed democracies that new relationships between citizens and institutions of governance must emerge if a crisis of democratic legitimacy and accountability is to be averted. As citizens have become less deferential and dependent, and more consumerist and volatile, old styles of representation have come under pressure to change. There is a pervasive contemporary estrangement between representatives and those they represent, manifested in almost every western country by falling voter turnout; lower levels of public participation in civic life; public cynicism towards political institutions and parties; and a collapse in once-strong political loyalties and attachments.

The US political scientist, Robert Putnam, in his famous book, *Bowling Alone* (from which this report derives its more positive title), argues that a decline in membership of civic networks has resulted in a precipitous drop in political engagement. People become engaged in civic and wider political affairs when they have acquired habits of communal connection – as these habits fade, political engagement atrophies. Whether or not one subscribes entirely to Putnam's theory of social capital, it is undoubtedly the case that most developed democracies are experiencing a collapse of confidence in traditional models of democratic governance. While there is no discernible popular disaffection from the idea of democracy, traditional structures and cultures of policy formation and decision-making are perceived as being remote from ordinary citizens.

A recent OECD report entitled *Citizens as Partners*, concludes that:
> *…democratic governments are under pressure to adopt a new approach to policy-making – one which places greater emphasis on citizen involvement both upstream and downstream to decision-making. It requires governments to provide ample opportunity for information, consultation and participation by citizens in developing policy options prior to decision-making and to give reasons for their policy choices once a decision has been taken.*

A Dutch report, from the ICT and Government Committee, asserts that:
> *Government in the Netherlands will face an insidious crisis if it does not quickly take measures to support new democratic processes. Failure to take such action will result in loss of legitimacy.*

The Swedish Government's Democracy Commission reports that:
> *Our results show that several public fora for political discourse must be opened. In pace with globalisation, the tendency to prepare policy through negotiation, for example, results in inadequate opportunities for citizens to obtain access to information and demand accountability. It is necessary to allow more citizen groups – rather than particularly resourceful lobbyists – to participate in the design of the system of rules on an increasing number of levels. In this respect, IT can create opportunities both for receiving important information and for participating in discussions. IT can also improve contact at other political levels between citizens and decision-makers. We consider that it is important, for example, to look for methods for using IT in order to publicise views presented by consultative parties and increase the opportunities for citizens to have insight in and opportunities to influence bases for decisions, for example in conjunction with environmental impacts analyses.*

The UK's Minister for e-commerce, Douglas Alexander MP, observed in a recent speech that:

The 2001 UK general election gave us the lowest turnout since universal suffrage – only 59% of the electorate were sufficiently engaged in the democratic process to take a stake in choosing their government. However, delve below these headline figures and the warning is even more stark. The detail of the demographics reveals that in the 18-25 age group over 60% did not vote. This group represents the democrats of the future and, if unaddressed, this level of disengagement would pose a threat to the long-term health of our democratic institutions.

and went on to declare that:

… it is now time to set all this activity into a clear policy framework and put e-democracy on the information age agenda. Government should set out what it means by e-democracy and how it intends to use the power of technology to strengthen democracy.

The second reshaper of democracy has been the rise of digital information and communication technologies (ICTs.) These offer a possibility of a new environment for public communication which is interactive, relatively cheap to enter, unconstrained by time or distance, and inclusive. Just as ICTs have had profound effects upon ways that people work, shop, bank, find news and communicate with friends and families, so they will establish new channels to connect citizens to hitherto remote institutions of governance.

Most developed democracies have established e-government agendas, which are mainly concerned to deliver government services online. E-government policies hold out the prospect of greater cost efficiencies as well as broader public convenience, but there is no intrinsic link between successful e-government and strengthened democracy. Some of the world leaders in e-government service delivery are far from being democracies. The challenge is to create a link between e-government and e-democracy – to transcend the one-way model of service delivery and exploit for democratic purposes the feedback paths that are inherent to digital media. So, instead of citizens simply being able to pay their taxes online (hardly a joy for most people), they would be able to enter into a public debate about how their taxes are spent.

There are at least four models of how e-democracy might work and it is as well if we identify these at the outset and explain which model we are concerned to explore in this report.

Firstly, there is the notion of direct or plebiscitary democracy. We entirely reject this as an alternative model of governance, for reasons outlined in the next chapter of this report. Evidence suggests that support for direct democracy is positively correlated with dissatisfaction with institutions of representative democracy. (Dalton et al) Indeed, one of the reasons for promoting e-democracy is to strengthen representative structures so that the allure of 'technopopulism' remains resistable.

Secondly, there are online communities. There are far more of these in existence than most people realise, constituting an autonomous civic network that can only be healthy for democracy. (Communities Online) We are interested in exploring how governments can connect with such online communities, but the main emphasis of this report is to examine whether and how governments themselves can initiate and sustain e-democracy exercises aimed at involving the public in the policy-making process.

Thirdly, governments are increasingly using online techniques as a means of gauging public opinion. These range from online surveys and polls to local referendums and citizen-initiated petitions. Most e-democracy experiments conducted by governments to date have been of this sort. Such exercises have their place in good governance, but fail to test the capacity of the internet to facilitate a broader and deeper approach to the process of public opinion formation.

Our main concern in this report is with a fourth model of e-democracy which is undoubtedly the most difficult to generate and sustain: online public engagement in policy deliberation. The emphasis here is upon the *deliberative* element within democracy. This has little to do with technological innovation and much to do with new thinking about how to enrich the democratic process. (See Bohman, Dryzek, Fishkin, Yankelovich)

Methods of public engagement can be described as deliberative when they encourage citizens to scrutinise, discuss and weigh up competing values and policy options. Such methods encourage preference formation rather than simple preference assertion. Public deliberation at its best is characterised by:

- **access to balanced information** – Polls, referenda and even government consultations do not require respondents to have access to any information before they state an opinion. Deliberative exercises are primarily concerned to discover what citizens think about issues once they have become reasonably informed about them. The provision of information to deliberating citizens needs to be comprehensive, balanced and accessible. It need not be the case that all participating citizens read or study information provided to the same extent, but efforts should be made to provide for all a basis for acting as informed deliberators.

- **an open agenda** – The questions asked of the public in non-deliberative policy exercises are simple and non-negotiable. For example, citizens may be asked whether an airport should be sited here or there; whether local taxes should be raised, lowered or kept the same. In deliberative exercises, whilst governmental and other promoters are likely to set out the broad parameters of the anticipated discussion, the agenda must be open to revision or expansion by the deliberating citizens. So, in the debate about the siting of a new airport, a deliberative agenda could move on to a discussion of the benefits of air travel as opposed to alternative methods, or a broader debate about the usual criteria for planning decisions.

- **time to consider issues expansively** – In most attempts to consult with the public, time is of the essence. Short, sharp results are sought via polls, referenda etc. Deliberative exercises must be temporally expansive, allowing citizens adequate time to think through an issue and then work out where they stand on it. The UK Parliament's online consultations tend to last for one month, allowing participants enough time to break in gently, contribute more than once and arrive at an evolved point of view.

- **freedom from manipulation or coercion** – All political exercises are at risk from manipulation, whether in subtle terms of rigging the questions asked or crude terms of pressurising participants to arrive at certain conclusions. Deliberative exercises must involve a high degree of protection of the independence and free thought of participating citizens. The analogy is with juries in courts of law, where the freedom of jurors from any influence but that of the factual evidence is paramount.

- **a rule-based framework for discussion** – Democratic deliberation is not to be confused with an anarchic free-for-all. People feel safer and discuss more freely when they are aware of the transparent rules of the debate. For example, there is no sense in rebuking an online discussion participant for submitting excessively lengthy messages several times a day; it makes more sense to declare at the outset a postings-per-day rule and a maximum message-length rule.

- **participation by an inclusive sample of citizens** – High-quality deliberation can be highly exclusive, but not if it purports to be democratic. Efforts must be made to recruit participants who are representative of those affected by or concerned about the issue being considered. In an online environment, this will inevitably involve confronting the digital divide and providing meaningful opportunities for those who would not usually participate in an online event. But the digital divide is not the only inequality: it also means creating opportunities for citizens who feel unconfident, less literate, politically alienated or socially marginalised.

- **scope for free interaction between participants** – Traditional consultation methods are based upon one-way flows: governments or other agencies ask the questions and citizens give their opinions. Deliberative exercises require two extra directional flows: citizens to government (so that participating citizens can in turn ask questions of those asking them to deliberate) and citizen to citizen (so that participants can exchange views with one another).

- **recognition of differences between participants, but rejection of status-based prejudice** – Some models of 'deliberative democracy' focus upon the elimination of differences between deliberating citizens,

so that issues of class, gender or ethnicity are not allowed to distort the validity of participants' contributions. We would argue that differences between participants are more often likely to enhance the process of deliberation and allow richer experiential input. But effort must be made to ensure that prejudices based upon status do not diminish the value of any contributions.

The challenge for e-democracy is to create imaginative new ways of enabling the public to deliberate about policy issues. A number of recent reports have explored such a possibility, including *Realising Democracy Online* by Blumler and Coleman; *Impact of the Emerging Information Society on the Policy Development Process and Democratic Quality* by Gualtieri; *E-Democracy in Practice* by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities; *ICTs and the Future of Democracy* by Snellen; *Open Channels: Developing Public Dialogue in Science and Technology* by Kass; *Consulting and Engaging Canadians: Guidelines for Online Consultation and Engagement* by the Canadian Privy Council Office; and *Electronic Civic Consultations: A Guide to the Use of the Internet in Interactive Policy-Making* by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior.

All of the literature cited above contributes formidably to the debate about the future of citizen-government relations in the information age. We do not propose to re-invent the wheel here and cover the ground of these reports, although we shall certainly wish to draw upon them for evidence.

The purpose of this study is to examine some of the issues that have been neglected so far in the debate about e-democracy. We would identify four areas where new thinking is needed:

Firstly, there is a need to think through the democratic rationale for online public engagement in policy deliberation. There are a number of concerns about the cognitive capacity of the public to comprehend the policy process and contribute usefully to it; these should neither be uncritically accepted nor lightly dismissed. These concerns call for an evaluation of the role of the public within a democracy. Should the role of democratic citizens stop at voting or stretch to deliberating? Will a deliberating citizenry, which is connected to the policy process, undermine representation and lead to direct democracy? Or will it strengthen the democratic process and help restore public confidence in the traditional methods of democratic governance? How can public opinion become informed and informing? These are not totally new questions, although the potential of a more connected democracy has pushed them to the fore. This study attempts to link the rationale for online public engagement to wider democratic theory.

Secondly, it is vital that institutions of governance, including both elected politicians and policy-forming bureaucrats, consider carefully the impact of online public engagement upon their own practices. And it is equally important for them to work out how they can adapt their practices to a more engaged and connected political environment. This study outlines the kinds of changes that are required.

Thirdly, there are implications in all of this for the nature of citizenship. The skills and strategies required by citizens with access to new channels of participation in policy-making are bound to become more sophisticated than those required in the more limited world of 'analogue politics.' This study explores these new skills and strategies and reports some new evidence from UK and Danish polls of internet users on their expectations for e-democracy.

Fourthly, although it is taken as read throughout this study that technology is a potential tool of democracy, rather than the sci-fi designer of a new political world, there is a real danger of the discussion of technology being neglected in the debate about e-democracy. Technology is never neutral in any process, least of all the democratic process, and so it is important to think about desired ends in terms of appropriate technologies for their achievement. This study seeks to analyse the existing ICTs and offer some recommendations about best use.

Finally, so as to root this study in the real world, rather than a speculative universe of futuristic schemes for the democratic use of ICTs, we have included brief accounts of some recent international attempts to engage the public online in a deliberative fashion. These are not presented as examples of best (or worst) practice, but in order to show that some (although very few) initiatives are taking place and that these are still experimental, learning experiences rather than evolved models.

Chapter One

Representation, Engagement and Democracy

What is the rationale for online public engagement? If the policy-making process is opened up to greater public involvement, might citizens expect politicians to become creatures of their will? Is there a danger that online engagement will give rise to a form of 'technopopulism', whereby the loudest, best resourced, most confident or most prejudiced voices of the public come to dominate the debate? Might online engagement encourage a form of government by focus group, with crass impressions and half-formed opinions serving as a substitute for rational deliberation? If the public is to enter the democratic policy-making process, is there an acknowledged point of entry and trusted space for debate, or is there a danger of the process fragmenting into countless discourses in which self-interested groups speak to themselves? These are all legitimate questions, frequently raised but infrequently addressed in the literature of e-democracy. These questions need not be approached as if they have only just arisen; they reflect perennial issues in democratic debate and existing political theory can cast some light on them.

Delegation v representation: the Burkean dilemma

Elected representatives are understandably concerned that public engagement in policy-making is a slippery slope to direct democracy and rule by endless plebiscites. It is not as if some of the proponents of online democracy have been shy about declaring such an objective. For example, Dick Morris, former strategic adviser to President Bill Clinton, argues that:

> *The internet offers a potential for direct democracy so profound that it may well transform not only our system of politics but our very form of government … Bypassing national representatives and speaking directly to one another, the people of the world will use the internet increasingly to form a political unit for the future.* (Morris)

In his famous Address to the Electors of Bristol, Edmund Burke, the 18th century politician and philosopher, stated what has become the classical case for representative rather than direct government:

> *Certainly, gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitted attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no, nor from the law and the constitution. They are a trust from providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.*
>
> *My worthy colleague says his will ought to be subservient to yours. If that be all, the thing is innocent. If government were a matter of will upon any side, yours, without question, ought to be superior. But government and legislation are matters of reason and judgment, and not of inclination; and what sort of reason is that in which the determination precedes the discussion; in which one set of men deliberate and another decide; and where those who form the conclusion are perhaps 300 miles distant from those who hear the arguments?*

To deliver an opinion is the right of all men; that of constituents is a weighty and respectable opinion, which a representative ought always to rejoice to hear; and which he ought always most seriously to consider. But authoritative instructions; mandates issued, which the member is bound blindly and implicitly to obey, to vote, and to argue for, though contrary to the clearest conviction of his judgment and conscience, – these are things utterly unknown to the laws of this land and which arise from a fundamental mistake of the whole order and tenor of our constitution.

What is usually remembered about Burke's position is his strong rejection of the principle of directly mandated delegation and his claim that representatives should be governed, ultimately, by their own reason and conscience. In contemporary terms, this explains why MPs feel free to ignore the majority opinion of their constituents on votes of conscience. What is often forgotten about Burke's position is his commitment to a representative having *'the most unreserved communication with his constituents'*, as well as to *'rejoice'* in and *'most seriously consider'* the opinions of constituents.

Burke was writing at a time when only a minority had votes. He justified such minority franchise in the name of *'virtual representation'*: the many, it was argued, were represented by the votes of the better-educated and more affluent few. So, the respect that Burke thought should be afforded to constituents was an exclusive and undemocratic respect.

In 21st century democracies the principle of virtual representation is firmly rejected, but the same cannot be said for virtual deliberation. In contemporary democracies there is a tendency for the political agenda to be set narrowly by political elites (including party managers and media editors) and for the majority of people to be squeezed out of the national conversation about politics. Burke would have defended this situation because he considered that, although *'the most poor, illiterate and uninformed creatures upon earth are judges of practical oppression'*, they *'ought to be totally shut out; because their reason is weak; because when once aroused, their passions are ungoverned; because they want information; because the smallness of the property which they individually possess renders them less attentive to the measures they adopt in affairs of moment.'*

Modern democrats would repudiate Burke's wish to exclude the majority from the political discussion, but would have some difficulty locating the point of entry into such discussion within the existing democratic framework. Online engagement becomes relevant in this respect, not as a substitute for elected representatives, but as a way of opening channels connecting them to the many whose voices are not often heard in policy debates. By engaging citizens in the policy-making process representatives, as well as representative institutions, show their (Burkean) commitment to entering into unreserved communication with those who elect them.

Participation v competence: JS Mill's liberal anxiety

Few contemporary democrats would wish to argue with JS Mill's contention that the whole people, regardless of class or gender, *'must be masters, whenever they please, of all the operations of government.'* In short, political sovereignty should reside in the people. Mill argued that such power should be exercised by electing deputies to represent them and also participating in discussion about matters that affect them. Not unreasonably has Mill been regarded as one of the key thinkers of modern liberal politics.

But Mill had a serious anxiety about the public's participation in politics:
The natural tendency of representative government, as of modern civilisation, is towards collective mediocrity: and this tendency is increased by all reductions and extensions of the franchise, their effect being to place the principal power in the hands of classes more and more below the highest level of instruction in the community.

With increased public participation, Mill feared that the overall level of political competence might suffer.

This worry is reflected in the thinking of many contemporary politicians and public officials, who see public engagement in policy-making as a floodgate through which all kinds of ignorance, prejudice and narrow interest could distort the political agenda.

Mill's response to this problem was to argue for civic spaces for discussion in which narrow interests and prejudiced outlooks had to be exposed to other, more reasoned voices. The inherent pluralism of shared public space would serve to broaden the terms of the public debate:

It is by political discussion that the manual labourer, whose employment is a routine, and whose way of life brings him in contact with no variety of impressions, circumstances or ideas, is taught that remote causes, and events which take place far off, have a most sensible effect even on his personal interests; and it is by political discussion … that one whose daily occupations concentrate his interests in a small circle round himself, learns to feel for and with his fellow citizens, and becomes consciously a member of a great community… (p.328)

What Mill is recommending sounds remarkably like the case often made for public service broadcasting: let people be exposed to a variety of impressions, arguments and analyses and, whatever their prior predilections, they are more likely to benefit from the plurality of voices and perspectives and feel more like members of a community.

One of the arguments against engaging the public in policy-making is that this will lead to populism and plebiscitary decision-making. But these could more plausibly be seen as consequences of non-engagement: people turn to populist solutions and illegitimate actions when they feel themselves to be outside the political sphere, incapable of making any meaningful impact through democratic means. The antidote to populist tendencies is firstly, the recognition that the public are entitled to express views and be heard in relation to matters that affect them; and secondly, the creation of civic spaces in which intelligent political discussion can be conducted and habits of informed deliberation developed. As Mill put it: *'Every one is degraded, whether aware of it or not, when other people, without consulting him, take upon themselves unlimited power to regulate his destiny.'* (p.329)

Opinion v deliberation: Dewey's rational filter

In her evidence to the UK House of Commons Public Administration Committee's inquiry into innovations in public participation, Anna Coote stated:

I do think that new methods, particularly deliberative methods, of public involvement have added a huge amount to the capacity of organisations to understand citizens and citizens to participate in decisions and to understand what goes into decision-making.

Considering the effects of such engagement upon policy-making bodies, she commented that:

…the experience makes them see the public in a different way. Instead of assuming the public are stupid and ignorant and selfish, incapable children, they wake up to the fact that they are dealing with intelligent adult human beings.

Coote's observation cuts to the root of a prevalent apprehension, not always as candidly stated, about the capacity of the average citizen to grasp the complexity of policy-making. Walter Lippmann famously described the average citizen, trying to comprehend politics, as feeling *'rather like a deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery off there, but cannot quite manage to keep awake'.* Like Mill, Lippmann had serious doubts about the capacity of citizens to perform anything more than the most marginal of roles in democracy:

What the public does is not to express its opinions but to align itself for or against a proposal. If that theory is accepted, we must abandon the notion that democratic government can be the direct expression of the will of the people. We must abandon the notion that the people govern. Instead, we must adopt the

theory that, by their occasional mobilisations as a majority, people support or oppose the individuals who actually govern. We must say that the popular will does not direct continuously but that it intervenes occasionally.

John Dewey offered a dialectical response to this problem: it was not that the public lacked the ability to become informed, but that no mechanism had yet been devised for adequately informing the public. Whereas Lippmann saw the public as a slumbering, staggering, thoughtless monster, Dewey's concern was that the public had become an invisible player in democracy:

What, after all, is the public under present conditions? What are the reasons for its eclipse? What hinders it from finding and identifying itself? By what means shall its inchoate and amorphous estate be organised into effective political action relevant to present social needs and opportunities? What has happened to the public in the century and a half since the theory of political democracy was urged with such assurance and hope?

The *'eclipse of the public'*, argued Dewey, was a consequence of its bewilderment in the face of political complexity:

The ramification of the issues before the public is so wide and intricate, the technical matters involved are so specialised, the details are so many and so shifting, that the public cannot for any length of time identify and hold itself.

The consequence of political complexity, as Dewey saw it, was the formation of simplistic, often manipulated, public opinion. This analysis was later to be reiterated by Fishkin, who regards opinion polls as almost useless 'snapshots' of public prejudice and ignorance, and Zolo, who considers the burden of complex policy-making as being too much for democratic citizens to bear. For Dewey, the solution lay in creating rational filters through which public information and communication can be channelled:

Till the Great Society is converted into a Great Community, the public will remain in eclipse. Communication alone can create a great community. Our Babel is not one of tongues, but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible.

Dewey was sanguine about the possibility of establishing a rational and trusted new medium which could facilitate public information and discussion. Could that new medium be the internet, or, at least, a certain, publicly-claimed and protected area of the web which could serve as an arena for civic engagement and deliberation? Blumler and Coleman have argued that the internet possesses *'a vulnerable potential'* for this role and that the creation of a *'civic commons in cyberspace'* which *'could become part of the democratic furniture: an integral component of the representative system (the Commons) and an open space for the represented to gather and talk (the civic commons.)'* (p.5)

Through such public discussion and consultation two benefits could be gained: the public could become more informed, by hearing from one another and from experts; and legislators and policy-makers could become better informed through exposure to the experience and often hidden expertise of the public. As Dewey argued:

No government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interest of the few. And the enlightenment must proceed in ways which force the administrative specialists to take account of the needs. The world has suffered more from leaders and authorities than from the masses. The essential need … is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is <u>the</u> problem of the public.

Conclusions

- Engaging the public in policy-making is not a means of diminishing the representative relationship, but of strengthening it. Even in an age when vast distances separated the represented from the centres of decision-making, Burke favoured the *'closest correspondence'* and *'most unreserved communication'* between electors and their representatives. ICTs provide new opportunities to connect citizens to their representatives, resulting in a less remote system of democratic governance.

- The alternative to engaging the public will not be an unengaged public, but a public with its own agenda and an understandable hostility to decision-making processes which appear to ignore them. By bringing citizens into the loop of governance, opportunities for mutual learning occur: representatives can tap into the experiences and expertise of the public and citizens can come to understand the complexities and dilemmas of policy-making.

- The old dichotomy between experts and the public is false and sterile. Considerable expertise resides within the public (which is made up, after all, of doctors, nurses, parents, entrepreneurs, police officers, social workers, victims of crime, teachers, elders) and the trick is to find innovative ways of drawing out that expertise and feeding it into the hitherto bureaucratised decision-making process. Providing the public with appropriate information about policy issues and utilising public experience and expertise in the process of policy formation, development and evaluation requires the cultivation of a critical and deliberative political culture.

Chapter Two

Two-Way Governance

Having said that representative governance is not threatened with extinction by online public engagement, it would be mistaken to conclude that the political process can remain unchanged in the face of greater citizen involvement. Indeed, the worst-case scenario for online engagement is one where politicians and bureaucrats tokenistically adopt all kinds of e-initiatives, such as online consultations and discussion fora, but retain existing structures of policy formation, so that the public's input is 'worked around' by powerfully entrenched institutions. Engaging the public in policy-making is a transformative process that will result in a model of two-way governance which is incompatible with a political culture of bureaucratic elitism.

Models of public engagement

What does *engaging the public* actually mean? The OECD has devised a three-stage model:

Information: a one-way relation in which government produces and delivers information for use by citizens. It covers both 'passive' access to information upon demand by citizens and 'active' measures by government to disseminate information to citizens. Examples include: access to public records, official gazettes, government web sites.

Consultation: a two-way relation in which citizens provide feedback to government. It is based on the prior definition by government of the issue on which citizens' views are being sought and requires the provision of information. Examples include: public opinion surveys, comments on draft legislation.

Active participation: a relation based on partnership with government, in which citizens actively engage in the decision- and policy-making process. It acknowledges a role for citizens in proposing policy options and shaping the policy dialogue – although the responsibility for the final decision or policy formulation rests with government.

Dr Sue Goss, of the UK's Office of Public Management, has devised a broader model of public engagement:

Giving Information	Consultation/ Listening	Exploring/ Innovating/ Visioning	Judging/ Deciding together	Delegating/ Supporting/ Decision-making
Sign-posting	Surveys	Consultative workshops	Deliberative polls	Neighbourhood committees
Leaflets/newsletters	Focus groups Priority search	Visioning workshops	Citizens' juries	Town/estate plans
Community profiles	Interactive community profiles	Simulations Open space events	Negotiation workshops	Tenant management organisations
Feedback on surveys and consultation	Public meetings forums		Community issue groups	
Annual performance reports			Community workshops	Community Development Trust
Support/advice	Panels	Planning for real community discovery	Consensus conferences	Partnerships/contracts with communities
Video/internet communication	Video boxes	Use of theatre, arts/media		Referendums/ tele-voting

Rather than seeing these as competing models of engagement, they should be regarded as a spectrum of participatory strategies. There is not a 'one-size-fits-all' solution to involving citizens in policy-making; considerable thought needs to be given to the appropriateness of the method selected for the citizens involved and the nature of the policy issue they are being asked to consider.

A range of innovations in methods of public participation in policy-making have been developed. These include:

Citizens' Juries Group of representative citizens, who take evidence over an extended period, deliberate and recommend to government, which still takes the final decision. This produces an informed and collective view, resulting from deliberation

Citizens' Panels/ Standing Research Panels Ongoing panels, maybe of 1,000-2,000 representative citizens, surveyed several times a year, usually by post or phone. Once some or all participants become more knowledgeable, they become less representative.

Formal Written Consultation Formally setting out the issues and proposed approaches in a written document, and inviting comment.

Forums and Panels Meetings involving citizens in discussion with officials and/or representatives. May focus on particular services or be more general. Membership may be invited or open. Agenda may be set in advance or formulated at the time according to participant concerns.

Focus Groups An established market research technique where an issue is explored in depth for 1 or 2 hours through structured but open-ended discussion by a group of around 8-10 people, representative of a particular sector, led by a trained facilitator. Keeping similar types of people together helps reduce inhibition and promote discussion.

Opinion Polls Random or chosen representative samples are used. In one variant (deliberative polling) participants have the opportunity to learn about and discuss the issue, questioning experts, so they can make informed and thought through judgements. 250 to 600 people might meet over 2-4 days with polls taken at the beginning and end of the event.

Referendums Asking a question of the whole population. May be carried out using normal election machinery, by post etc. If not binding, more likely to be called 'Citizens' Poll'.

Petitions A citizen adopts a position on an issue, and invites others to signal their support. In some variants, the process is interactive, with exchanging ideas and evolution of the proposition. The end result is submitted to a representative body (e.g. a Parliament), or to government (e.g. a local authority), in the expectation that the level of support will influence its decisions.

Active Interest in Policy Citizens – or groups of citizens – register their interest in an area of policy or service. Government and/or representative bodies then proactively inform them of facts, events, progress etc; and ensure they are engaged in some form of consultation when the time is right.

The various models for policy engagement can be plotted on a spectrum ranging from snapshot votes to deliberative voice mechanisms, as shown on the right:
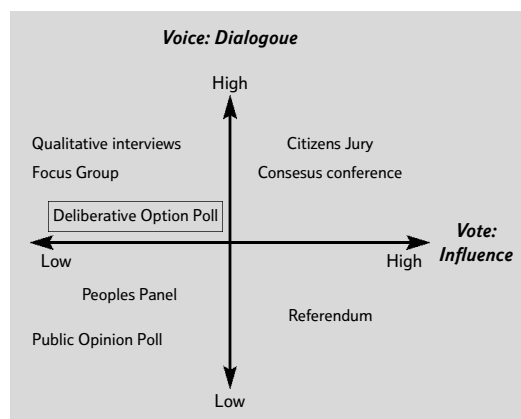
Objections to public engagement

Some politicians and officials are fearful that online public engagement might comprise a threat to effective policy-making and good governance. These concerns should not be dismissed lightly. Outlined below are seven distinct objections and our responses to them:

• Selection and representation

How are participants selected? If there is no overt selection process and anyone is allowed to participate in an online policy-making exercise, the self-selected sample is likely to comprise citizens who are more confident, articulate, engaged and politically motivated. If the participating sample is selected, who selects it and by what criteria? Self-selection is in danger of resulting in an unrepresentative sample and selection in a sample that represents the interests of the selectors.

Concerns about representativeness are allied to concerns about replicability. Just because one group of citizens arrive at a particular policy position, after due deliberation, does not necessarily indicate that they represent what a deliberating public would think; another group of citizens, under similar circumstances, might arrive at quite different conclusions.

Politicians are particularly concerned about participants seeking to undermine representative governance by claiming unique legitimacy in speaking on behalf of fellow citizens. As suggested in chapter one, public engagement in the policy process is often seen as opening the floodgates to direct democracy. However, there is a danger in expressing reservations about public participation within policy-making as if it were the same thing as the public making decisions instead of elected representatives. Policy-making and decision-making are linked, but separate roles.

As the objective of online deliberation is to inform elected representatives, then the selection of participants need be less preoccupied with representativeness and more concerned to recruit a broad range of experience, expertise and interests. So, when survivors of domestic violence were enabled to give evidence online to the UK Parliament, individual contributions were not evaluated in terms of their capacity to reflect the experiences of all survivors of domestic violence, but their ability to reflect their own experience in ways that could inform the decisions of legislators.

• Managing expectations

Politicians worry that, having been consulted, citizens will expect too much. A major difference between politics as a general practice and single-issue policy debates is that the former tends to involve compromises and trade-offs to a much greater extent than the latter. Having deliberated about a single policy issue – or even a set of issues – citizens are likely to be disappointed that their efforts and apparently wise conclusions are outweighed by wider budgetary, party political, legal or cultural considerations. If such unmet expectations result in public frustration and discontent, might it be argued that involving the public in the policy process could actually serve to increase political alienation, disenchantment and cynicism?

The key to avoiding such disappointment is transparency. As long as citizens are told absolutely clearly at the outset what can and cannot be expected from an online policy deliberation, they are unlikely to be frustrated by the process. Frustration arises from unclear objectives or exaggerated claims as to the importance of the public's input. Transparency relates not just to purpose but also to outcomes: it is vital that participants receive a clear response to their deliberations, so that they can assess the extent to which they have actually informed or influenced policy.

• Apathy

Politicians sometimes argue that the public is too apathetic about politics to be bothered with time-consuming deliberation. After all, if significant numbers of citizens do not even vote, what evidence is there that they want to enter into policy debate?

It is undoubtedly true that most people are not interested in most policy issues. But it is equally true that all are interested in some, particularly when they affect them or when they have specific expertise or experience. The objective of deliberative exercises is not to create a permanently deliberative citizenry, but to generate civic discussion around those issues where citizens do have real concerns, knowledge and relevant life experiences.

Nina Eliasoph, in her intriguing study of how American citizens avoid talking about politics in public, refers to a strange dichotomy between refusal to discuss political issues in public settings and willingness to state political views within the quiet whispers of informal conversation. (Eliasoph) The cultural informality and personal invisibility of online discursive space offers a possibility of allowing the conversational whispers of conventionally private conversation to enter the public debate.

• Lack of public information

Research findings overwhelmingly suggest that members of the public are uninformed, often about the most elementary aspects of civic and political knowledge. (Dimock and Popkin 1997) The case of the US Public Affairs Act of 1975, which one third of American respondents expressed an opinion about when polled, even though the Act was entirely fictitious, is often cited as an example of the public's gullibility and willingness to comment upon matters it knows nothing about. (Bishop et al) Politicians may well fear that an ill-informed – or misinformed – public would not be up to the task of policy deliberation. They are right about this. But currently it is just such influence that uninformed citizens have, via opinion polls, referenda and other snapshot measurements of non-deliberative opinions.

Deliberative exercises depend upon a willingness by participants to become exposed to new and balanced information. If citizens are to inform their representatives, then they in turn must provide informed input. For many citizens, being invited to deliberate about policy will present a challenge to a lifetime of not being required to think very much about political issues. Just as people start to take an interest in how their car works once it breaks down – and often acquire considerable expertise once they become involved in it being fixed – there is also evidence that people who need to find out how the political system works in order to use it for their own purposes can learn very quickly. Of course, not all participants in deliberative exercises will absorb information to the same extent (this applies also to representatives), but the evidence from online policy consultations so far is that participants who seek to have the most influence make sure that they are well informed.

• Digital exclusion

In most countries of the world only a minority of the population has home access to the internet. Even in countries where most citizens are connected, the consequence for those without access is to exacerbate their disconnection from communicating with and influencing power. Politicians may fear that online policy deliberation will merely serve to amplify the voices of the digital 'haves' at the expense of the 'have-nots'.

The solution to the problem of digital exclusion does not lie in abandoning the internet as a tool for democratic engagement and consultation, but in creating new opportunities for connecting citizens without home access to the internet. Such opportunities can be provided by public kiosks, cyber-cafes and community centres, as well as via TV and other digital platforms. As well as these channels for digital inclusion, wider aspects of usability need to be addressed – as discussed in chapter four.

• The problem of scale

The internet's capacity to enable many-to-many discussion is questioned by some, who argue that deliberation is best conducted in face-to-face settings involving relatively small numbers. The communication theorist, John Durham Peters, quoting Plato's belief that 5,040 is the ideal number of citizens to participate in a true democracy, argues that: *'Dialogue can only be dialogue if strict rules are imposed on the number of participants.'* (Glasser, p.104)

Essentially, such critiques question the possibility of genuine deliberation on a large scale. Certainly, within the traditional model of face-to-face, synchronous dialogue, there are formidable obstacles to a deliberative process involving several hundred or thousand participants. That said, most national parliaments and assemblies comprise a deliberating membership of several hundreds: 669 in the German Bundestag; 659 in the UK House of Commons; 626 in the European Parliament; 435 in the US House of Representatives. Not all members of these assemblies can speak in any one debate and rarely are they all present at the same time, but this does not make them inefficient or inadequate as deliberative bodies.

It is the asynchronous nature of online engagement that makes manageable large-scale, many-to-many discussion and deliberation. In an online discussion, the gaps between utterance, reception and response are fundamentally different from those in face-to-face or other synchronous settings. In online discussion listening (and lurking) can be just as important a function as speaking (message-posting) and the best deliberative results are often achieved when messages are stored or archived and responded to after readers have had time to contemplate them. Online deliberation can be regarded as deliberation without the crude and suffocating constraints of time that often render synchronous discussions futile, facile or over-heated. Of course, mechanisms of moderation and mediation are crucial to the success of many-to-many, asynchronous dialogue, just as rules, procedures, protocols and habits are essential to the success of face-to-face debates.

• Empowering the bureaucracy?
Some politicians fear that policy deliberation exercises are a means of sidelining them from their role as interpreters of the public will or mood. After all, a competence of elected politicians is their ability to feel the public's pulse. As elected representatives, politicians claim a special relationship with the public who have given them their power. The danger of government ministers – or even unelected bureaucrats – using public involvement in policy-making in order to push a particular policy agenda is one that representatives generally wish to resist.

The solution here is not for elected representatives to reject public engagement as a challenge to their legitimacy, but to use public engagement themselves as a way of strengthening the quality of their representative mandate and developing more informed, publicly supported policy options as counterweights to executive monopolies on policy formation. In short, public engagement exercises need not only be the tools of the executive, but can become a key tool for legislatures in their role of holding governments to account, scrutinising policies more effectively and serving as democratic conduits for informed public views. Arguably, online engagement with the public could offer a major opportunity for elected representatives to enhance their legitimacy as political mediators of the public voice.

The importance of moderation and mediation
There are crucial distinctions to be set out between an online free-for-all and a deliberative policy exercise. The former requires no rules or regulation, no attempt to reach a conclusion, no summary of what is said and no feedback. In free-for-all discussions anyone can say anything, but no-one can have much expectation of being heard or of influencing policy outcomes.

Deliberation requires trusted facilitation. In short, it does not just happen. Those facilitating online engagement in policy deliberation will only be trusted if they:
i) set out clear and transparent rules for participants, e.g. maximum length of messages; maximum frequency of messages; attitudes to offensive language and defamation;
ii) regulate the discussion, both by implementing agreed rules and adhering to ethical principles, such as data privacy, political neutrality and non-coercion;
iii) moderate discussion messages, ensuring that any participant with a point to make receives a fair hearing and that the discussion is conducted on a fair and friendly basis;

iv) help discussion participants to reach conclusions (not necessarily shared ones) rather than incessantly rehashing old arguments;

v) summarise the deliberation so that key points of evidence and main conclusions are set out in a balanced and accessible form;

vi) seek to ensure that there is feedback to the participants, so that they do not feel that they have contributed to the policy process without any response from the policy-makers.

Trusted facilitation is the basis for democratic mediation. Technology enables connections to be made between representatives and the represented, but technology on its own does not *facilitate* deliberative engagement. Facilitation is a cultural-democratic function. The facilitator's role is to provide discursive focus, stimulate groups into interacting constructively, build a sense of team spirit or community, referee, troubleshoot and keep time.

To give a sense of some of the variety of host or facilitator roles, White and Boettcher have conducted a number of short interviews with hosts of online communities in *Hosts on Hosting* (2000). On the same theme, Powazek's *Design for Community* (2001) ends each chapter with an interview with a community expert. People have created many metaphors to describe the role of online facilitators. White lists a number of different facilitator roles:

The social host – The social host or 'host as innkeeper' is the most well-known online facilitation model originating out of long time discussion communities like The Well, Electric Minds and Salon Table Talk. As a dinner host brings together the elements of a successful party, a social host helps create an environment where the members feel comfortable to participate. Part conversationalist, part counsellor, part role model and sometimes even part bouncer. They are also usually part of the conversation.

Key skills include: greeter; social skills; conversation stimulator (content, style, process); sometimes utilises a persona or a 'character'; and conflict resolution (particularly in open, public online communities)

The project manager – In communities with a strong task, work orientation or subject focus, the project manager pays attention to adherence to focus, timelines, task lists, commitments and process. This can be a leadership and/or support role. This can be aided by the use of static web pages to organise information, the combined use of linear and threaded conferencing space, and the regular use of summaries and reviews.

Key skills include: traditional project management skills; writing and summarisation skills; technical skills such as HTML to create information and summaries with visual impact; and ability to abstract information and process it for the group

The community of practice (CoP) facilitator – CoPs share and build knowledge around a practice. Part of this process is being a group – having identity and reputation, being able to have agreements and some sense of accountability to the group. Facilitating CoPs online can focus on some of these 'sociability' and relationship issues. This includes helping members get to know each other, articulating and making visible agreements, and watching/nurturing group dynamics.

Key skills include: group facilitation skills; a working knowledge of CoPs; cybrarianship; passion for community; ability to facilitate facilitative behaviours within the community

The cybrarian – Cybrarians represent the gift of knowledge and information. They are 'topical' experts. Cybrarians help members find information internally and externally of the community. They organise information and make it accessible. And they stimulate interaction with the introduction of or pointer to new and relevant information.

Key skills include: web-savvy research; strong organisational bent; and love of learning and information

The help desk – In online interaction spaces where there is an ongoing influx of new members, there is often a repeated need for simple help pointers on using the software or understanding the community purpose and guidelines.

Key skills include: technical understanding; patience; and clear communication skills

The referee – Good cop or bad cop, this is the role of bringing attention to and/or enforcing community norms, rules and procedures. Referees help the community regulate, protect members and deal with problems. For example, if a community has a policy of no posting of advertising, the host has the job of deleting offending posts and asking the poster to refrain from posting ads. The clearer the rules, the easier the job. Likewise, where there are no clear rules, this job is often perceived as authoritarian and arbitrary. Referees are often not 'regular members' who are 'just part of the conversation,' but a role apart. These tend to be employees of online community sites and have rather small facilitative impact on a group.

Key skills include: thick skin and a slow fuse; internet experience; and familiarity with common nettiquette

The janitor – It can get messy in cyberspace, as we leave our words in conferences and topics. The janitor tidies up forgotten topics by freezing and archiving, redirects activity if it is in the wrong area, and generally tidies up.

Key skills include: familiarity with software and attention to detail

Learning to listen and respond: the challenge for politicians and civil servants

Rightly or wrongly, citizens believe that governments do not listen to what they say. For example, the October 2001 Eurobarometer asked European citizens whether they would like to take part in a 'dialogue on Europe.' 26% said that they would, but 62% said that they would not – with 29% agreeing with the statement that: *'My views would not be taken into account anyway'* and 17% agreeing that: *'It would be a waste of time.'* The US Harris poll asks an annual set of questions about public alienation. In the late1960s, at the height of the Vietnam war, barely one third of US respondents agreed with the statement that: *'What I think doesn't count very much any more'*; in the 2000 poll 56% of respondents agreed with this statement.

Given this overwhelming evidence of public distrust of governments' listening abilities, the last thing that governments should do is promote online policy engagement exercises and then prove the public right by not appearing to take account of what they say. Unless online policy engagement results in meaningful responses and policy outcomes, the process will lose credibility and democratic legitimacy. Governments are recognising this important point. The recent *Government Online (GOL) eDemocracy Report* concludes with the following remarks:

> *… interactive consultation is a newcomer … to traditional democratic systems. These systems have arranged for the voice of the citizen to be heard mainly via elections and elected representatives. Civil servants traditionally used their professional expertise, scientific research and knowledge of the public realm and public opinion as a basis for their policy proposals. Citizens wrote letters, which were answered along certain bureaucratic procedures. All these processes are turned upside-down in the age of online interactive debate between citizens, elected officials, journalists, civil servants, civil society professionals and scientific scholars. What's the mandate of a civil servant provoking the debate in an online environment? How does a minister account for the accurate development of a policy proposal, when so many voices have been speaking? Must he take them all seriously? And what if parliament disapproves of his carefully interactively drafted proposal? Such questions will in the future become more relevant. Online consultation makes them a reality, which will confront us with demands for answers. At this stage, we have found that this has not yet been urgent for governments. If the practice of online consultation by governments is to move ahead, that will undoubtedly soon be necessary.* (GOL-IN eDemocracy Report (2001). http://governments-online.org)

The UK's e-commerce minister, Douglas Alexander, in a keynote speech about e-democracy, stated that:

In order to attract people to get involved in online consultations and discussions, it is vital that government and representatives demonstrate their commitment to listening to and learning from the contributions that are made and to respond to them in a timely and transparent way. As millions of people log on and speak out, the challenge to elected representatives is clear. There are vital issues to consider here; not least of which will be the resources that will be required to handle increased participation.

Public concerns about the extent to which they will be taken seriously in consultations and other engagement exercises have little to do with trust in the internet and much to do with lack of trust in government. In short, most public doubt about the value of online policy engagement results from unsatisfactory experience of participating in offline policy consultations. Research into government officials' perceptions of the impact of participation initiatives tends to support these doubts. Research for the UK Government, conducted by De Montfort University in 1998, surveyed local authorities to find out their perceptions of the impact of participation initiatives. 40% of respondents reported that such initiatives had very little impact on policies or merely confirmed prior policy decisions; 36% of respondents considered that such initiatives led to better informed decisions or strongly influenced final decisions.

For public engagement in policy deliberation to become more than a token gesture, politicians need to engage with the public *during* the deliberative process. In short, there is a need for greater integration between public policy deliberation and political decision-making. In most policy engagement or consultation initiatives, elected politicians are conspicuous by their absence. Of course, politicians are operating within intense time constraints and cannot be expected to engage in a permanent conversation with the public. But evidence indicates that citizens are far more likely to take policy deliberation seriously if political decision-makers are prepared to interact with them for at least some of the time. For example, in a post-online consultation survey of participants in *Womenspeak*, which involved survivors of domestic violence, 32% of the women considered that: *'the MPs were interested in what was said during the discussion'*, but 68% were either unsure or thought that the MPs were not really interested; 28% believed that MPs would use information gained from the consultation to make changes, but 57% did not. (Coleman and Normann, 2000)

Conclusions

- There is a broad range of ways in which the public can be engaged in policy-making. It is important to select the right model of participation for the right situation.

- Deliberative engagement is fundamentally different from other models of participation in that it is preference-forming rather than simply preference-affirming.

- There are several well-rehearsed objections to involving the public in online policy deliberation, most of which concern the public's ability to represent its own views in an informed fashion.

- Online policy deliberation must be mediated, rule-based and well-moderated if it is to contribute to the democratic process.

- Governments should not offer online consultation as a gimmick; they must be committed to integrating evidence gathered into the policy process and being responsive.

Chapter Three

Connected Citizenship

It is not just governance that has to change if democracy is to be re-shaped. Just as the old model of democracy has depended upon a weak conception of representation, so it has assumed a worryingly high degree of indifference and lethargy on the part of the represented. A Lippmannesque caricature of the public has prevailed for too long. We tend to regard disengaged citizens as deserving whatever they get in return for their apathy and engaged citizens as busybodies who want too much. Digital technologies alone will not produce a change in these attitudes; but they can be used as tools to facilitate a more involving, inclusive and porous democratic culture.

In this chapter we first present some new research about what the public wants from e-democracy. Two polls, conducted separately in the UK and Denmark, sought to discover what kinds of online democratic engagement internet users actually want. Following on from these findings, we consider the necessary skills and strategies required by citizens if they are to engage constructively in online policy deliberation.

What citizens want

Despite the historic lack of public involvement in policy-making, and the reservations of many citizens who have been consultees, there is a surprising interest on the part of citizens in exploiting the democratic opportunities for online policy engagement. For example, a MORI poll, conducted in August 2001 asked 1,921 UK adults aged over 18 which new e-services they would most like their MPs to offer them. Over one in five selected *'a consultation forum where he/she can read constituents' views'*; the third favourite choice after online surgeries (39%) and active e-mail addresses (32%.) When asked which online services they would most like to see within the next five years, almost one in five (18%) opted for *'public spaces being created on the web where people can debate policy issues.'* An October 2001 Danish telephone poll found that while 94% of Danish internet users had never availed themselves of the opportunity to discuss issues with politicians online, 36% would like within the next year to *'participate in online hearings about Bills'* and 31% would like to enter into online discussions with politicians.

To analyse these public responses in greater depth, we drew up a series of 20 questions for a 5,883 panel of frequent internet users. Amongst these frequent users (of whom 95% have home internet access and 86% log on at least once a day), 23% had taken part in an online consultation and 73% stated that they would like to take part. 89% favoured the creation of an independent space on the internet where citizens could debate policy issues and 79% thought that the government should be promoting e-democracy.

When offered a range of options for online services and asked to select their preferred two, online policy consultations proved to be the most popular (see diagram 1, opposite page).

Again, when invited to select from a range of policy goals for government, more respondents opted for online policy consultation as one of their two preferences than for any other option (see diagram 2, opposite page):

These findings reflect the views of internet-connected citizens – 'netizens' – who are not representative of the wider population. But, as majority and near-universal access to the internet approaches – as has happened with telephone and television penetration – these views are indicative of more than a minority enthusiasm.

Diagram 1 *Hopes for the Future*
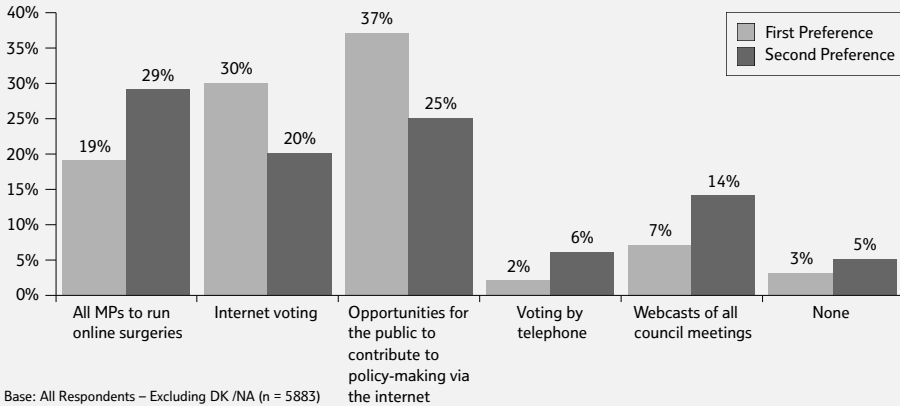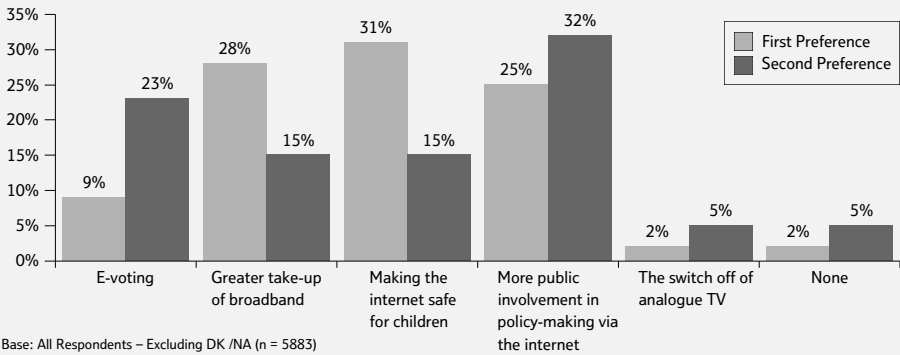Which of the following would you like to see by 2010?

Base: All Respondents – Excluding DK /NA (n = 5883)

Diagram 2 *Emphasis on Government*
Which of the following should the Government concentrate on achieving?

Base: All Respondents – Excluding DK /NA (n = 5883)

What citizens need to know

If citizens are to be brought into the policy-making process, it is important that they know what their rights are. What kind of information does government want from them? How much of what they say can they expect to be used by decision-makers? How much genuine interaction can they expect to have with politicians? In what form, and within what timeframe, can they expect a response to their deliberations? How will the consultation engagement be evaluated, and by whom?

Useful codes of consultation practice have been drawn up by the Australian Capital Territory Government (*http://www.act.gov.au/government/department/cmd/omca/commcons.htm*) and the UK Government (*http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/index/guidcons_codes.htm*). The Canadian Government is in the process of producing guidelines specifically for online consultations. There is a need for robust, transparent standards in public engagement, which leave citizens in no doubt about their rights and reasonable expectations.

Central to the question of how to define online rights is the need to be clear about what it means to be a citizen. Morrison and Newman are right to observe that: *'there seems to have been very little discussion about how the whole project of connecting citizens with government might and should differ from linking consumers with commercial opportunities.'* (Morrison and Newman) Citizens must possess constitutionally rooted rights which are qualitatively different from, if not stronger than, their rights as purchasers in the market. Previous experiments in participatory democracy have often failed because of the absence of connection to such constitutionally embedded rights.

As best practices become clearer, so will formal standards and public expectations. It is important, though, that the process does not become trapped in a culture of entitlements, as if citizens were merely consumers and policy engagement merely a playing out of contractual obligations. Just as we have argued that e-democracy requires institutions of representative governance to adapt, it is also the case that new models of responsible citizenship must be developed, so that citizens can enter into policy deliberation as mature and equal partners in the democratic process.

In the past, citizens could hope at best to be 'listened to' and at worst ignored – except perhaps at election time. Strengthening representation through a process of ongoing, digital discussion and consultation is not about simply giving citizens a better hearing – although that in itself would be a good start. It is about giving citizens ownership of their representation. It is about citizens as shareholders in power rather than consumers of policy. It is also about the responsibilities and obligations of being a democratic citizen within a networked society. We do not envisage a quasi-utopian citizenry that is constantly engaged in decision-making, as would be required by a direct, plebiscitary democracy – but citizens who have learned to use the democratic muscles which have atrophied during long years of exclusion from the deliberative process.

If citizens are to enter the policy debate as informers of their elected legislators, they must enter as informed informers. Just as one-way governance has over-emphasised the need to inform – and sometimes misinform – the public at the expense of letting them communicate, the new, more engaged and interactive age should not celebrate communication to the exclusion of information. Deliberation calls for a plentiful supply of high-quality, balanced and challengeable information sources so that citizens do not come to policy discussions with little more than their own experiences or those of others who agree with them. Sunstein has written persuasively about the danger of the internet creating a fragmented and ghettoised information environment where citizens only connect with self-selected sources of information that confirm their own prejudices.

The digital citizen will need to possess skills that citizens and subjects of previous generations did not have to think about - including those of media literacy. In the past, many of those who were educated to higher levels were taught logical and rhetorical skills. This was an invaluable aid to the production of structured argumentation based upon compelling evidence. Digital citizens need to develop a new rhetoric of participatory discourse. This will entail the development of agreed protocols of public deliberation. Freedom to have your say is all very well, but not if everyone else is speaking at the same time, so democratic discussion must be rule-based.

New languages of politics will have to be admitted into the representative arena, including those based on experience and storytelling as well as analysis and ideological polemicising. There can be no room for the downgrading of vernacular or emotive expression if we are really to take seriously the authentic testimonies of diverse experience as part of the policy process. Some critics of deliberative democracy (or, at least, of its more philosophically lofty proponents) have argued that deliberation could be seen as a constraining mechanism, designed to rein in forms of subjective, expressive and affective advocacy and thereby exclude those social strata less in tune with white, male, middle-class discursive traditions. (Young) Unless deliberation is interpreted in an inclusive sense, there will be a danger of governments seeking the views of the public only as long as the public speaks its particular language.

Conclusions

- Many citizens do not feel that their views or experiences are taken into account by policy-makers and would like to participate in policy deliberation.

- Citizens' participation should be guaranteed by clear standards, setting out their rights and reasonable expectations, but also calls for participating citizens to acquire deliberative skills and accept civic responsibilities.

- Online policy deliberation must embrace the language of the people and not expect citizens to adopt the jargon of government. Political discourse needs to be humanised and made user-friendly.

Chapter Four

Appropriate Technologies for Online Engagement

The voice/vote-map we presented in chapter two can also be drawn up for online engagement methods, as shown on the right:

The specific methods on this map are often very new and immature. The software tools tend to be beta-level, but are, however, getting better all the time.

Channels of engagement

A wide range of technologies for online engagement exists – from e-mail (easy-to-use and ubiquitous) to the nuances of avatars. Online interactive spaces allow users to connect and communicate with each other through one or more of the following technological channels:

- E-mail (one-to-one)
- Instant messaging (one-to-one, few-to-few)
- Mailing lists and newsgroups (many-to-many)
- Forms (one-to-one and one-to-many) (from guest books to weblogs)
- Chat rooms (one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many)
- Linear/threaded asynchronous bulletin boards (many-to-many)

These 'technologies of connection' (White, 2001) allow people to communicate, give feedback, ask questions, complain, exchange information, and build relationships.

E-mail

It is argued that e-mail is fundamental, the 'king' of applications. However, a number of interesting new communication tools are developing as contenders to this throne. Today's users demand 'presence management' (active buddy list; 'back in 20 minutes' facility), 'transparent interoperability' (gadgets that inter-communicate), convergence (e-mail via mobile phone), and real-time routing of information (receipt of important items, filtering of other data for later or to someone else).

Instant messaging

Instant messaging (IM) has outgrown its roots as a cute toy and teenage phenomenon. It is becoming a serious productivity aid for dispersed work groups, customer services, and real-time interaction within and between companies.

The Jabber Foundation (*www.jabber.org*) has developed an IM system focused on privacy, security, ease of use, access from anywhere from any device, and interoperability with IM, phone, and web-based services.
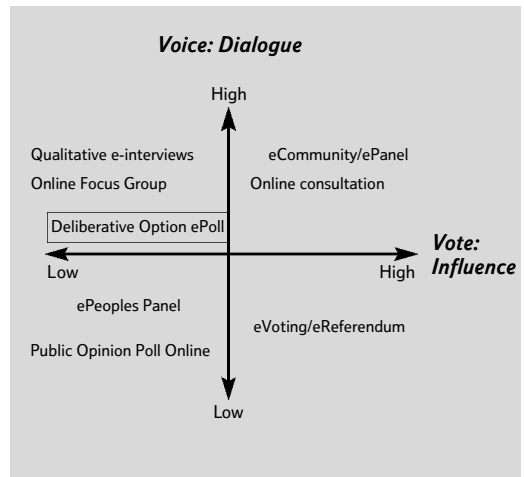
The developments are at the intersection of XML, presence, and real-time messaging. Its open source technology framework facilitates freedom of communication among people, applications, and systems across all platforms. A support web site offers commercial support, custom application development, hosting services, and industrial-strength Jabber servers.

Mailing lists and newsgroups

Internet mailing lists and newsgroups are some of the most stable technologies on the internet. Basically, these technologies have not changed for the past 10 years. Standards were high then and have been maintained.

The e-mail list management software called ListServ developed by Thomas in 1986 is the leading brand in the mailing list world. ListServ is a commercial product, but is free for small sites. There are a number of alternatives, among them Majordomo, a community-supported free software, Mailman, a GNU mailing list manager, and Lyris, another commercial system. These tools deliver millions of messages to millions of internet users every day. One of the biggest problems with mailing lists is the weak web-integration and the lack of open metadata standards.

UseNet, which originated in 1979, was the first world-wide distributed discussion system. It consists of a set of 'newsgroups' with names that are classified hierarchically by subject. There are many politically oriented groups, and a lot of heated discussions but, it is only used by a fairly small minority of internet users. One of the major problems with UseNet is that it functions best with a dedicated newsreader application. This application is in fact built into most modern e-mail/web-tools, but only a few users actually use it. Google, the search engine, has recently started offering a web-based way to read and post messages on UseNet through its Google Groups. Google has indexed more than 650 million messages posted on UseNet since 1995. It is impossible to say how many messages were posted before 1995.

Forms

On the web, forms of various kinds are a key technology. The usage ranges from petitions to structured surveys to web-based e-mail and publishing systems. The technology used to create forms on web pages is extremely simple and can be learned by any hobby web programmer. What to do with the stuff people fill in on these forms is another matter. Often, the form just sends away an e-mail, or saves the form entries in a database to be dealt with later, or saves the entries directly on the web as in a guest book-type of web page, or even as a contribution to a web-based discussion (see below).

One of the key problems with forms is the 'usability' or rather, the lack of. Although much can be said in favour of desktop applications like Microsoft Word, a standard web-based form has not yet even reached the WYSIWYG ('what you see is what you get') stage. The web technology does exist, but only in proprietary systems, which limits its use.

Chat rooms

Often dismissed as a trivial interaction designed for teens chatting with each other or with celebrities, chat rooms offer some unique online interaction features. They can be a useful tool, especially if used in combination with asynchronous conferencing. The advantage is that it is possible to gather and interact with a group for a very low cost. The disadvantages are many, however. Chat rooms are slow and often chaotic.

Bulletin boards

The web-based conversation spaces known as bulletin boards, online forums or conferences rely on a variety of software applications that provide linear or threaded asynchronous communications capabilities. Linear software presents posts in chronological order one after the other and is best for more conversational and relationship building interactions. Threaded applications allow specific responses to specific posts,

splitting off sub threads as needed and are often used for distance learning and Q&A applications.

The most comprehensive guide to software for conferencing on the web is Woolley's *thinkofit.com*. There are many good tools on the market, but there are some problems to overcome. For example, users often demand features that they have seen on another site, but, if too many features are offered, less experienced users get lost.

IT for all – beyond access

Beyond traditional concerns about the digital divide and the democratic importance of universal access to the internet, there are several key issues to consider about making digital technologies people-friendly.

• Accessibility

When designing online engagement exercises, it is important for designers to give full attention to accessibility issues. Since such problems come in various shapes – ranging from 'the digital divide' to 'design for all' – the practical problem is basically one of setting levels for 'acceptable losses', i.e. accepting that one cannot include everyone, but also that one will run into problems if there is any deliberate exclusion of certain groups – say, the visually impaired.

There are good, general accessibility guidelines for web sites at W3.org/WAI, World Wide Web Consortiums Web Accessibility Initiative. Some countries have formal guidelines or rules (and sometimes even legislation, such as '508' in US) on accessibility of governmental web sites.

• Usability

Usability gurus like Nielsen of *useit.com* have long argued that a usable web is the key to success. Their concern has mainly been e-commerce, but their knowledge goes further. Story at *webreview.com* asks a number of central usability questions one should consider when designing any kind of web site:

Is it efficient?
• Can tasks be performed with keyboard strokes? (Important for power users.)
• Does the site reflect a clear understanding of how users do their work?
• Are response times fast enough to keep users in a flow state?

Is it intuitive?
• Does it take advantage of users' mental models?
• Does it behave consistently throughout?
• Is it visually consistent?

Is it supportive?
• Does it allow mistakes to be easily undone?
• Does it provide advice/ tools/reference materials?

Is it engaging?
• Do users feel in control?
• Do users enjoy their experience?

Engagement designers must consider to what extent the deliberative element should be applied in online exercises. Powazek (2001) talks about 'burying the post button', i.e. designing the community space so that people must first read stuff they want to comment on before they can post the comment.

Practically all successful online engagement exercises have been concerned with usability issues – very early in the engagement design process some kind of user involvement has been initiated and online environments have been tested and re-engineered through focus groups and user tests.

• Reliability

The main reliability challenge in online engagement exercises is political rather than technical. The participants want to know what the result of the exercise will be – how their voices will be heard. The facilitator must be seen as a reliable, non-partisan source of legitimacy to the whole process. In most cases there will be no need to use more advanced technical measures such as digital signatures and certificates. But there can be situations where safeguarding the integrity of participants requires stronger measures.

• Security

As with any kind of online activity these days, security is an issue. There is a constant flow of new threats, such as vira, worms and hackers. The risk of getting hit by whatever kind of attack varies to some extent, but is actually quite high for everyone, as there is a growing number of vira, worms and hackers and they tend not to discriminate between their 'victims'. However, almost all the recent vira and worms attack only Microsoft-based systems.

The risk of more deliberate attacks – from terrorism to simple criminality – is also always present. Some policy deliberations will probably be prone to more than the average attack, i.e., be the subject of political activism of various kinds, so such activities should contain a solid security-oriented quality control. This control should ask questions such as:

- Does the technology platform used have a documented security statement, or 'guarantee'?
- If using standard software packages, does the platform use the latest, stable version?
- If the platform allows users to upload documents, are there virus control mechanisms in action?
- If the platform allows users to enter formatted entries (e.g. using HTML-codes), are potentially malicious codes (e.g. <script>-tags etc.) filtered out?

• Readability

Readability – plain language – is an important factor. Plain language is a requirement for democratisation, better legal rights and efficiency. Democratisation, because clear texts will make it possible for everyone to understand the content of official documents and to form an opinion. Better legal rights, because it makes it easier to interpret the law. And efficiency, because people, not least all the civil servants, will spend much less time in reading unintelligible documents.

In more interactive engagement exercises, most, if not all, user content will be created online. In web-based exercises, users are asked to make their entries in more or less usable forms. Here, online tools like spell checkers can be offered. In addition, offering layout tools, such as online HTML editors, can contribute to making the debates more readable. The degree to which users should be allowed to lay out their contributions must be considered carefully. Too much variation will clearly be distracting, whereas tools for marking text bold, making lists, etc. can have a positive effect on the readability of contributions.

• Current and comprehensive

All engagement exercises have a time line, infinite or finite. It is important to keep the information provided up-to-date all the time. A 'What's New?' page is in general a useful service to that effect.

Ongoing deliberations often bring forth a wealth of new resources, links, publications, stories, etc. All such material should be extracted and provided in a 'resource centre', which can become a valuable knowledge base.

• Levels of entry

'One size fits all' is an outdated principle on today's web. Personalisation and customisation are more or less standard components in modern community portals and content management systems. Such features can contribute greatly to the sense of engagement and connectedness.

There can be situations which call for various levels of 'membership'. There can, for example, be reasons for having closed/private conversation areas within or outside public areas.

• Push/pull

Related to the above, the users would expect to be able to have good subscription options, so they can get notifications when particular events occur (reply to message; new themes; etc).

The organisers of the exercise will also have an interest in being able to push information out to the users. Having an announcement newsletter, which goes out to all registered users, is often a good idea.

• Channels and interoperability

The various channels of engagement are starting to speak to each other, in a technical sense. XML-RPC is a technology used to share resources among web servers, and to let applications access shared resources. XML-RPC supports XML-based remote procedure calls (RPCs), as defined by *www.xmlrpc.com*. A remote procedure call is a way for one computer to call another computer and have it run commands and return the result to the first computer. XML-RPC uses HTTP as the transport and XML as the encoding. Relatively simple JavaScript functions can process these calls. A number of software vendors have started offering XML-RPC services in their packages. One example is WebCrossing *(www.webcrossing.com)*.

An example of how XML-RPC and the like could be used to enable more qualified and informed debates would be to offer news feeds into ongoing debates.

• Authentication

'On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog' is a famous saying about the internet. In policy deliberations, there can be situations where participants will prefer to be anonymous. This should not be disallowed but, in general, people should be urged to stand forward. For security reasons, it is often wise to ask people to register. For those who need to be completely anonymous, one might consider having a dedicated area where postings can be made without registration. It is advisable to set up clear rules in advance as to what will be accepted.

• Role of intermediaries

We have already discussed the importance of facilitation. Facilitators, moderators and administrators need good tools. Too often, the off-the-shelf packages have limited functionality in that area.

There are a number of basic troubleshooting techniques (inspired by White, 2001):
http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communityfacilitation.htm:

> **• *Working behind the scenes***
> If a member is violating the guidelines or rules, or other members have expressed concern, you can start by trying to clarify the situation by e-mail. This can save face for the member in question as well as for the host/facilitator.

> **• *Working 'live' in front of the community***
> Some communities value knowing what is going on and may be less trusting of 'behind the scenes' interventions. When working on a problem in front of the community, it may feel as if you are working 'without a net'. The stakes increase as people's reputations are put on the line. If problems are resolved in public, there should be a clear procedure.

> **• *Hiding or deleting/erasing posts***
> When members post something that is against the guidelines (spam, obscenities, personal attacks), the host can either hide or erase posts. Posts with questionable content may be hidden, and linked to with an accompanying warning message. Erasing posts should only be done in extreme circumstances and for clearly stated purposes – to avoid issues of censorship.

> **• *Banning***
> Banning is when a person is denied access to a service, such as a deliberation exercise. People should only be banned according to the stated processes of a deliberation exercise. In private deliberations, this is fairly easy to do. In public communities where members can register with free e-mail addresses,

banning an e-mail address is not an effective solution. There are people who have the sole intent of disrupting the process – in online community lingo known as 'shunning'. Often the most effective 'cure' is simply to get everyone else to ignore them.

While tools for solving problematic situations are crucial, tools that improve deliberative processes are also important. There are surprisingly few such tools around, but there is reason to believe that some will come out as spin-offs to tools like Jabber.

• Filtering

The amount of information created or provided in an engagement exercise can be overwhelming. The participants – and especially the facilitators – will need tools for managing this information flow. One example is the filtering technologies. There are four kinds of personal tools:

• *Profile filtering* is the most straightforward approach. You describe your interests (by picking from a list or entering keywords) and the software rejects anything that doesn't match. Many news sites have such features.

• *Collaborative filtering* (also called 'social filtering') compares your likes and dislikes to those of other people to predict your preferences.

• *Psychographic filtering* is similar to collaborative filtering, except that it predicts your likes and dislikes based on a 'psychographic profile' derived from a questionnaire.

• *Adaptive filtering* learns as it goes along, by asking you to 'rate' things or by monitoring your clickstream to watch what you do. For instance, Amazon has a service that asks you to check the books you liked and then hit a 'learn' button to fine tune your preferences.

Intelligence filters are still crude. The relevance ranking is immature, leaving out or – more often – leaving in too much. The learning process is cumbersome and slow.

• User ratings and polls

One related kind of deliberative information management is to allow users to rate other users' messages. This can be combined with a personal threshold manager, i.e. a system for not showing messages rated as being of little interest by other users. This system has been used at popular community portals such as *Slashdot.org*.

User engagement can also be created by using standard polls. These can be connected to discussion fora.

Buy or build? Off-the-shelf or Custom-built?

Off-the-shelf packages
There are a variety of 'community-in-a-box' style packages that provide a template community site, for example CommunityZero *(http://www.communityzero.com/)*. Such packages often lack flexibility.

Powazek (2001) defines four kinds of community tools that are available to buy:

Web-based
'There are some really powerful web-based tools to jumpstart a community… These sites enable you to sign up and have some powerful community features at your fingertips in minutes.' (Powazek, 2001) These are usually cost-free.

Open Source
'Another genre of community tools is the open source, shareware, or freeware… These programs are hacked on and perfected by programmers all over the world, using the net to work in concert. Some are aborted first-attempts or worse. The software itself is free - you can download it, tweak it, put it on your server, and use it for absolutely free (some open source projects have conditions, though). What is not included, however, is

installation, customisation, support, or maintenance.' (Powazek, 2001) The freeware option does therefore entail hidden costs.

Low-cost tools
Some companies invest time in providing easy-to-install, low-cost programmes with reasonable functionality. *'The leader in this space is Infopop (http://infopop.com), the creators of one of the bellwethers of community tools, the Ultimate Bulletin Board (UBB). UBB-driven sites are everywhere, from personal homepages to professional sites.'* (Powazek, 2001)

Professional softwares
'Prospero Technologies and Web Crossing power some of the biggest community sites online.' (Powazek, 2001) Prospero Technologies *(http://prospero.com)* run by community software makers Delphi Forums and Well Engaged, runs many newspaper sites, record companies, and CBS and FOX broadcasters. Web Crossing *(http://webcrossing.com)* provides software for Salon, CNN, and the *New York Times* discussion areas.

'Every tool comes with its own set of design constraints.' Powazek (2001) It is advisable to design what you require first, then decide on a tool. If none of the off-the-shelf packages are suitable, it is advisable to build your own software.

Custom-built options
There are many self-build options – for example *SourceForge.net*, an Open Source collection containing 223 projects in Message Boards, 175 projects in Conferencing, and 436 projects in Chat. All of these projects are Open Source, offering good quality downloadable source code for innovative systems like w-agora, phpBB, and OpenBB.

SourceForge.net offers a free hosting service for software developers wishing to develop using Open Source. This service offers a complete development platform with mailing lists, message forums, task management software, bug tracking, web site hosting, permanent file archival, backups, CVS repository, and web-based administration.

Next generation threads
E-mail messages frequently represent an entire history of a conversation; a single message generates a series of replies, or may be forwarded to new people who might enter the conversation. As conversations progress, it becomes difficult to determine who wrote what and in what message a run of text first appeared.

Hitherto, in plain-text mail messages, prefacing each 'quoted' line of a previous message with the character '>' typically conveyed this information. Each time a message is quoted, another character is added. This solution is imperfect for several reasons:

- It conveys only hierarchical information. For example, a line that begins with '>>>' only indicates that the text that follows is a third level reply. While this often implies the message from which the line came, it is not unambiguous.
- It proves difficult for users to determine the author of a particular line of text. Typically, the only indication of author is an attribution line above the quoted text, but no standard mechanism for this exists.
- Editing to the quoted text should be highlighted – for example by placing asterisks around it. This can adversely impact the line wrapping.
- Adding the character (") would require 'hard wrapping' the text to ensure that the character appeared at the beginning of every line. Doing this cleanly creates issues for any message that uses proportional fonts or that does not have fixed line-breaks. For example, centered text would become left aligned. Wrapping positions may seem awkward when proportional fonts are used for display. And when the text is quoted multiple times (as a result of a sequence of replies, for example), lines which are hard-wrapped can overflow onto the next line, resulting in difficult to read messages.

A solution is needed to make following threads simpler. To this end, Microsoft, Qualcomm and Lotus proposed a new e-mail threading standard to replace the 1998 standard W3C. (See *http://www.w3.org/TR/1998/NOTE-HTMLThreading-0105*)

The new proposal, 'HTML Threading' enables user agents (e.g. e-mail programmes) to identify the source message and author for arbitrary runs of text. It also defines conventions that apply distinct visual styles to texts written by different authors.

The overall goals for HTML Threading were:

1. To enable Sending User Agents (SUA) to provide, and Receiving User Agents (RUA) to retrieve, properties of the message from which an arbitrary range of text originated.
2. To enable SUAs to provide, and RUAs to retrieve properties of the author of an arbitrary range of text.
3. To preserve the flow and hierarchy of the conversation thread as message responses build up (including which messages were responses to which messages).
4. To enable SUAs to offer a default presentation for text based on author and/or hierarchy.
5. To enable RUAs to offer special presentation for text based on the hierarchy of the conversation, the author of a run of text, and/or the original message from which text came (e.g. quoted vs. new in the message).
6. To degrade smoothly so that down-level and text-only clients can still distinguish the flow of responses and (implicitly) the author of each range of text.

While HTML in e-mail has spread epidemically, HTML Threading has not broken through.

> *It's clear what's needed: a standard way (in XML, naturally) of representing threads. After all, threads are of unique importance to the web. They give conversations their persistence. They are the fundamental way those conversations are organised. And they are unique to the new networked world; there's nothing in the real world that matches them precisely.* Webzine JOHO (2001)

Message threads – conversations on e-mail lists or in web forums – are one of the most valuable uses of the internet. Yet, the lack of a message thread exchange standard has divided the internet's conversational currents. New technological innovations in this area are a necessity. Innovations have been made, but are not yet implemented – for example the next-generation web technologies such as XML.

An XML-based thread standard would preserve discussion boards and move discussions from one host to another. It would enable the pursuit of conversations across conversational types. Implementing a standard would make it easy to upgrade any instant messaging session or e-mail interchange into any threaded discussion forum. P2P Web Services, (distributed web services among peers) could be used to establish universal, flexible, portable conversations.

The web site *www.quicktopic.com* offers a solution for when particular threads threaten to overwhelm an e-mail mailing list. Its creator, Yost, aims to simplify movements up and down the conversational chain – for example, providing the facility to expand instant messaging into a full message board. A standard for the interchange of threads would make this possible. Yost has been developing a standard for message thread exchange, tentatively called 'ThreadsML'.

The ThreadsML standard will have the power to save, move or share conversations; aggregate them with other message flows; attach them to any web object, or intelligently archive them for reference ('grassroots knowledge management'). Service providers known to have expressed interest include Jabber, *Topica.com*, *EZBoard.com* and *Gazm.org*.

Current thinking is based on RSS 1.0. Yost has produced dynamic RSS 1.0-feeds from all QuickTopic-threads (by adding '.rss' to any thread, one can get the thread represented in pure RSS 1.0. Example: *http://www.quicktopic.com/7/H/rhSrjkWgjnvRq.rss*).

For more information about this, see:

http://conferences.oreillynet.com/cs/p2pweb2001/view/e_sess/2125
http://www.hyperorg.com/backissues/joho-jun17-01.html#threads
http://www.quicktopic.com/7/H/rhSrjkWgjnvRq/p-1.-1

Open Groups is a noteworthy project in this field. Its purpose is to aid the search, location, evaluation, and joining of ongoing interactive public groups across the internet through the development of open standards for online groups.

Eventually, a basic standard should be adopted to describe ongoing public online groups, including e-mail lists, web conferences, news groups, chat rooms and other online places where ongoing group interaction and information sharing of a many-to-many nature occurs. (This would not include instant message chats, live online events, specific threads on web conference systems, or non-public groups.) The working group is drafting an XML/RDF-based schema.

Building Communities

Online deliberation involves both citizen-to-government and citizen-to-citizen relationships. Building such relationships and nurturing a congenial communication environment involves the formation of virtual communities. People do not simply go online to deliberate about policy; they go online because they are social animals who like relating to other people.

Axelrod (1984) defines certain requirements for online cooperation. Individuals must be able to meet each other repeatedly, they must be able to recognise each other online, and they must have information about each other's previous behaviour.

Ostrom (1990) outlines design principles for successful communities. The group boundaries must be clearly defined and the rules governing the use of collective goods must match local needs and conditions. Individuals affected by the rules should be able to participate in modifying them and have the right to devise their own rules. There should be a system for monitoring members' behaviour – community members should undertake the monitoring themselves and there should be a graduated system of sanctions. Community members must have access to low-cost conflict resolution mechanisms.

Kim (1998) defines some design principles for community-building:
- Define the community's purpose (using a mission statement, a strong site personality and a compelling backstory)
- Create extensive gathering places (using an overview or map, including rich communications features and allowing members to extend the environment)
- Create evolving member profiles (by communicating the benefits of membership, making profile creation as easy and fun as possible and by keeping profiles up-to-date)
- Promote effective leadership & hosting (by building a flexible system and providing online support)
- Define a clear-yet-flexible code of conduct
- Organise and promote cyclic events (by holding regular, hosted, themed events, and conducting community services)
- Provide a range of roles (by offering newcomers a controlled experience, increased privileges to regulars and recruiting leaders from within)
- Facilitate member-created subgroups (using features that facilitate small groups)
- Integrate with the real world (by celebrating events that reinforce social identity, acknowledging important personal events and encouraging real-life meetings, when appropriate)

To summarise: engagement is a social process involving relationship building, the development of a sense of place and belonging. Micro-content development of community suites can help foster connections and interactivity, and story telling can play a vital role in community interconnection.

The role of technology in online engagement

Successful online engagement is primarily related to social, cultural, and organisational issues; technology is only of secondary importance. It is tempting, therefore, to sideline technological issues. However, technological issues are of fundamental importance to the success of online public engagement.

Building a toolkit for online engagement requires an understanding of how technology can help and hinder engagement and community building. This is essential for managing expectations of the technology and evaluating results. What is it we want to achieve, and how do we use technology to achieve these goals?

Wenger (2001) defines online engagement in terms of communities of practice as opposed to online communities (*see ewenger.com*). He outlines a number of critical technological issues which are relevant to this discussion.

Rhythm: presence and visibility

Organising time and space is challenging in online environments. A regular rhythm of events and rituals can be used to define the community. Rhythm is especially important for time-limited events, such as a 12-week consultation process. Rhythmic events could include:
- Regular 'board meetings' create a sense of routine
- Unusual events (such as a chat with a minister) break the routine and create excitement
- Milestones with scheduled activities enable participants to plan their engagement
- Waves of hot topics create a sense of change, development, and renewal.

The web site can create a sense of communal time by using a communal calendar; reminders about upcoming events; invitations to join in; the use of occasional synchronous events, such as teleconferences, virtual chats and online meetings; and publications of minutes of recent events soon after they happen.

Identities and roles

Every member brings their own personal identity to the community. Participation in the community develops people's personal identity, and commonalities and differences develop between people. Personal portals personalise the experience for each participant. Even simpler systems allow users to customise the way information is presented. Most community systems can recognise a participant from one session to the next and place 'new' flags to guide navigation. A 'front porch' facility (personal publishing space) can strengthen both personal and communal identities.

Community development, maturation and integration

A community evolves over time in terms of how community members unite, how they interact, and how communal knowledge develops. It is crucial to design multiple levels and types of participation – allowing people to have different relationships with the community. Peripheral participation (such as lurking) should be accepted, but is bound to affect community building.

Two-way webbing

'For too long software tools on the web have been about letting the few publish and the many read,' (Dumbill, 2001).

The readable and 'writeable' web – the two-way web – facilitates production as well as consumption of web content. Production of web content has long been a bottle-neck. Key writeable-web technologies, such as WebDAV and online WYSIWYG HTML editors, have emerged but have yet to develop fully.

The rapidly growing area of web publishing known as weblogs, or 'blogs', has existed for around five years, but has recently gained momentum, due to the development of a number of interesting new technologies. Weblogging technologies are used mainly to create rolling pages of frequently updated,

chronologically listed links and commentary. Blogging is seen by some as a form of mainstream web entertainment, with its star performers and its popularity ratings. (Events such as the Bloggies *http://www.bloggies.com* strengthen this image.) There is, however, more than entertainment to blogging. Curling (*http://www.llrx.com/columns/notes46.htm*) describes three types of 'blog' in addition to the standard personal diary format: The Researchers' List of Annotated Resources (e.g., Knickknack Drawer, *http://www.researchbuzz.com/weblog/index.html*); The Extremely Succinct Pointer Sites (e.g., Doc Searls, *http://doc.weblogs.com/*); and the Annotated Journals (e.g., New Media Musings, *http://jd.manilasites.com/*).

A weblog can be a personal diary, and can also be used for 'collaborative writing'. Groups of people working on a joint, distributed project can share material and ideas via a weblogged hub site.

A blog is a powerful way of telling stories that refer to, and make sense of, the documents and messages that we create and exchange in our professional and private lives. It is a simply designed and usable storytelling technology that could represent the next wave of grassroots knowledge management implementations. Storytelling and blogs share one common ground: grassroots interaction, a concept promoted by Seely Brown, Dennings, Snowden, and other prominent knowledge management specialists.

Blogging and storytelling are related in the following ways: (Nichani & Rajamanickam, 2001)

- Stories are concrete – dealing with specific people, things, events, rather than abstract concepts. Blogs are highly specific. Blog directories include *www.bloghop.com*, *www.blogstart.com* and *http://eatonweb.com*.
- Stories are temporal – consisting of events unfolding in time. Blogs are continuous and chronological updates of events. Most are updated on a daily basis, or more frequently.
- Stories are purposeful – dealing with agents who have goals, obstacles or conflicts and solutions or resolutions. This is true of a typical entry in a blog. *www.notsosoft.com*
- Stories convey understanding because they are told in context. Context conveys emotions, triggers individual and group memories, provides intuition and insights to events. Bloggers establish context over an extended period of time and since their audience is made of regular visitors, context can be implied or can be explicitly hyperlinked to a previous entry.
- Stories with the highest appeal are the ones that have a degree of strangeness, yet are plausible, have the perspective of a single protagonist, are told as simply as possible, and are recent and at least partly true. The most widely read blogs have precisely the same qualities. *'Be original be unique. Always comment on links you provide. Tell the readers what to expect and what you think about it. Be observant, that is one of the best ways to find great contents. You are unique just like everyone else. You might see a different perspective altogether. Regular updates are mandatory; daily updates are not.'* Shanmugasundraram (2001)
- Stories are direct and unfiltered communication of one-to-one and one-to-many. Blogs are also direct. Bloggers are distrustful of established information gatekeepers and are free to communicate directly with their audience.
- People use stories to enhance face. Related to face enhancement is Schank's notion of ME-GOALS. People often tell stories to demonstrate something they want to say about themselves (e.g., 'I'm smart', or 'I'm funny', etc.). Not applicable to Blogs.
- People tend to hear in a receptive mode rather than in the reactive mode that other forms of communications create. When listening to stories, people absorb what they're hearing instead of concentrating on preparing responses and questions. Blogs by nature are a free flow of personal ideas with no tolerance for hostility. *'The site creator limits and approves membership, they don't need to be defended as intensely as bigger sites, nor do they attract – or permit – posters who abuse others. One obvious payoff is that the flow of ideas is strong, uninterrupted and impressive.'* (John Katz, 2001)
- Good stories resonate well between the teller and the listener. Their message is universal. Good blogs speak in an original and unique voice, apprehended and comprehended by a wide constituency.
- Stories are a good framework for sharing information, meaning and knowledge. Original blogs were similar frameworks for sharing links, commentary and personal thoughts.

Since weblogs are digital and use the web for publishing and distribution, they have a number of advantages over traditional means of storytelling:
• More accessible than face-to-face mode
• Scale very easily across a large network, thus reaching wider audience
• Easily archived and retrieved any number of times
• Providing context is much easier with hyperlinks and cross references

'Blogger' (*blogger.com*) is a leading tool for webloggers, providing a method of automating (and accelerating) the blog publishing process with its free, automated publishing tool. Blogger can be used to send blog postings to an existing web site, or to create a hosted blog. Other weblogging systems exist, such as Greymatter (*http://noahgrey.com/greysoft/*) and Movable Type (*http://movabletype.org*).

Weblogging technology is becoming more and more advanced, offering bookmarklets for one-click publishing; posting via e-mail; display by calendar; multiple categories; built-in comment systems; 'e-mail this entry' features; e-mail notification systems; recently updated lists; FTP files to remote hosts; XML-RPC and/or SOAP interfaces.

Conclusions

• There is not one single online channel called 'the internet' – there are many ways of conducting online discussion and deliberation.

• Beyond access, there are major issues of accessibility, usability and security that online democracy must tackle.

• Encouraging citizens to feel at home online calls for community-building and new ways of developing virtual sociability.

• Many new technological features are now available which could provide new settings for policy deliberations.

Chapter Five

Global Case Studies

Anyone studying the experience so far of online public engagement in policy-making will come up against three unavoidable truths:

- There are very few examples in any country of the internet being used to involve citizens in policy deliberation.
- Where examples can be found, they are of an experimental nature; online public participation is still in its infancy.
- Almost all of the cases one finds are frustrated by the same two problems:
  i) too few people know about them;
  ii) governments fail to integrate them into the policy process or respond to them effectively;

We present the following case accounts not necessarily as examples of best practice, nor to dwell upon their limitations. All of them are innovative and pioneering efforts to use digital technology to invigorate the democratic process. Ten years from now much of what is reported here will seem terribly primitive and obsolete, but unless we learn from what has been done in the early stages of e-engagement there is little reason to be sanguine about the future. Models of public service do not evolve spontaneously.

Italy

Iperbole is an online civic network in Bologna. It was set up by the Bologna municipality in January 1995 in order to provide a link between citizens and the municipality, and as 'a laboratory for the collective intelligence'. The project aims to widen the use of ICTs, supply information and interactive services to the citizens of Bologna and create a dialogue between citizens and public administrators.

Local citizens benefit from a network of internet public places, free internet access points, e-mail and newsgroups. There is direct and remote internet training for beginners; online healthcare support; online services for senior, disabled people and young people; and a 'time bank' through which local people can exchange services.

There is an online discussion forum; publication of local documents (with abstracts and glossaries) and customer satisfaction surveys. Iperbole is also participating in two European research projects:

1. *Demos* aims to develop a new participative methodology based upon sociological conflict resolution which will help involve large numbers of citizens in the discussion of European, as well as local/regional political topics.

2. Eden aims to support public participation in online urban planning consultations, through the development of Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools based on user requirements.

Further information: *http://www.comune.bologna.it*

United Kingdom

Since 1998 the Hansard Society's e-democracy programme has been running a series of pilot online

consultations for the UK Parliament. The purpose of these e-consultations has been to enable groups of citizens with relevant experience and expertise to inform and advise legislators on specific areas of policy.

Online evidence has been collected from survivors of domestic violence, for the All-party Domestic Violence Group; recipients of tax credits, for the House of Commons Social Security select committee; experts on stem cell research, for the House of Lords committee recommending legislation on that subject; and MPs, parliamentary staff and the public discussing Parliament's use of ICTs, for the Information select committee.

The online consultations have usually been set up in partnership with organisations specialising in the policy area who help recruit relevant participants – so, the Hansard Society e-democracy programme's main role is to make the deliberative process work. Participants engage in discussion for one month, both about policy and their own experiences. At the end, a summary is produced by the Hansard Society and submitted as evidence to Parliament.

Parliamentarians have liked the experience of receiving evidence from citizens who are directly affected by policy decisions. Archy Kirkwood MP, the chair of the Social Security select committee, stated that:

I think it's an experiment that has been a success and I think if it were to be rolled out on a more widespread basis it would enhance the work of Parliament.

Evidence received in this way reflects experience and expertise that would usually be overlooked when evidence is taken only from known experts and respected interest groups. The Hansard Society e-democracy programme conducts extensive research to find out how participants feel about the process. Most are pleased to have taken part, not only because they were connected to politicians, but also because they benefited from citizen-to-citizen discussion and community building. The women in the domestic violence consultation set up their own community web site after the official e-consultation ended.

For more information: *www.democracyforum.org.uk;www.publicevidence.net; www.hansardsociety.org.uk/eDemocracy.htm*

Estonia

The Estonian TOM web site – an abbreviation of *Tana Otsustan Mina* which means *Today I Decide* – was launched by the Estonian Government press office in June 2001. Its objective is to enhance citizens' participation in the policy-making process by allowing them both to comment on draft laws and submit their own ideas for new laws. To participate in TOM, citizens have to register their names and e-mail addresses; in due course it is hoped that registration will be based upon digital signatures.

Proposals for legislation can be submitted by citizens – after which there is a two-week period for the proposal to be discussed by the public and a three-day period for the author to revise the proposal. There then follows a three-day period for public voting on the proposal. Proposals that receive less than 51% of the online vote are dropped, but if over half of the online voters support a proposal, it is forwarded to the appropriate government department and considered, with follow-ups from them posted on TOM.

There are currently 2,700 registered users of TOM and the site has received 190,000 hits per month. So far, there have been nine laws proposed which have been taken forward by government departments.

For more information: *http://tom.riik.ee/*

Finland

In the city of Tampere, Finland, Jari Seppala, the information officer in the local government city planning department, invented and created an experimental interactive web-based city planning game. It enables inhabitants of an area, as well as citizens outside the immediate vicinity, to play a significant role when the local council is considering planning schemes.

The main aim of this initiative is to guide the city planners as to the wishes of the people. Seppala says:

> *It's a real situation and we have done it in two areas, two suburbs where the city is intending to make master plans – changes – to certain areas… In a way this planning was part of the normal and legal real planning of the process and this game was part of it. Of course it gave only one piece of information and material for the official and legal process but it was part of the real situation.*

The idea of the city planning game provides a window whereby the public can view possible alternatives to the proposed plans. They can choose their favourite possibilities and see how the area and the landscape could feasibly change according to their will over a two-month period.

15,000-20,000 citizens live in the two urban areas where this has been implemented. The web site received about 4,000 hits and approximately 800 messages were posted. There were incentives offered – small prizes delivered to the home – chosen by random selection from those users who left a posting.

Only 5% of local inhabitants played the game. The question that lingers unanswered is why only 20% of those who went online completed the game and left a message. There are three possible reasons that could be put forward for such a wide gap between the 4,000 citizens of Tampere who visited the site and the comparatively small number of 800 who finished the game and posted a message:

• People felt no need to send a response
• It was simply played as a computer game and those participating had no interest in its real process as a means to an end
• It was too time-consuming to complete

Seppala hopes that a similar interactive project in the future will involve citizens' input at an earlier stage, thus enabling their contributions to inform the process of planning questions for such a game or consultation. The aim here is to ensure the prevention of a similar discrepancy in the percentage of users who do and those who do not complete the task occurring again.

The citizens who took part in the game had only to commit their time to the cause once and the library-provided internet access points meant that there was no need for people to pay the usual phone-tariff or a connection fee. This would not pose a problem in Tampere as 65% of the adult population have internet access at work, 46% have access from home and 81% have both.[1]

Tampere's city planning game was an all-inclusive initiative because internet access was provided at key local social venues where anyone could go online and play. A paper version of the questionnaire was also available, although anyone who used this means would not have experienced the same amount of interaction. Advertising for the consultation could be seen on the city web site, in newspapers and in libraries – where help could be given to users unfamiliar with the web – and on the radio. Results of this particular consultation are published on the web site and press releases keep local people informed of the decisions and progress made concerning the planning schemes.

For more information: *http://www.tampere.fi;*
http://www.tampere.fi/tiedotus/viinikka/frames.htm;
http://www.tampere.fi/tiedotus/tohloppi/;
http://www.tampere.fi/viy/tyontekijat/jari/gradu.pdf

Germany

The city of Esslingen, which has 50-60,000 residents, had plans for new housing areas which would affect 5,000 people who lived around the proposed site and, more specifically, 2-300 people in the immediate vicinity. Due to the discontent that had been triggered among residents, a citizens' consultation was started in May 2000. This had been active for a year when the internet-based study was started by researchers, Hans Hagedorn and Matthias Trenel, based upon web-based interactive discussion of environmental and

---

[1] Research Survey on Access to the Internet in Tampere, Finland, Autumn 2000; Information Department, City Planning Office, Tampere, Finland

planning issues facing the people of Esslingen.

The government sponsored project *medi@komm*, provided a virtual platform for the case study – based on the mediation system 'zeno' – which was implemented on the internet in May 2001. Two purposes were served:
- Information was provided about the planning object in question for anyone who wished to access the information.
- A discussion forum allowed citizens to express their opinions interactively over a period of one month.

Among the researchers were professional facilitators, who not only supervised the fairness of the discussion, but also encouraged constructive dialogue between citizens, planning staff and local politicians in order to identify common ground where possible. Anyone was permitted to join and 26 people posted 120 messages. There were 4,000 hits and it is estimated that 80-100 passive users also existed online to read the contributions.

Esslingen has a largely commuter-based population living within a village-like atmosphere. Collective emotions can run high when plans are submitted for changes to the town. Such facts made it feasible to expect a large proportion of the publicity for the web discussion to be by word of mouth coupled with a lot of everyday face-to-face interaction and discussion of the subject 'on the street'. Hagedorn, Trénel and Märker began their advertising by handing out leaflets at one of the joint citizens' initiative and local council meetings. They also placed adverts in the local newspaper and gave a presentation of their work to gain wider acknowledgement.

The outcome of the forum was discussed among politicians and influenced the debate in the local media. The researchers have suggested that, in this respect, the case study of Esslingen represents a substantial step forward towards e-government, since most internet-based participatory processes so far either lacked sufficient actual participation by citizens or did not manage to attract enough attention among decision-makers or in the public domain. In Germany, the case of Esslingen has therefore become a well-known example of citizen participation via the internet. Consequently, considerable attention was given by both the local politicians and the local media. However, throughout the whole project the researchers maintained a healthy awareness that the decision to go ahead with the planning project had never been in any doubt by the local politicians. Many participants doubted the authenticity of the consultation project from the outset due to the fact that the real outcome is so severely embedded in the political process.

For more information: See the presentation of the Esslingen case on the 'Conference for cooperative planning and mediation' in Berlin, June 27-29, 2001.

http://www.mediakomm.net; http://zeno.gmd.de

Sweden
In 2000, the city of Kalix in northern Sweden invited local residents to participate in an online policy exercise designed to plan the renovation of the city centre. The policy forum enabled citizens to discuss the issues with politicians and with one other; there was also a structured survey in which participants could vote for their planning preferences. Citizens were able to participate by post, fax and telephone, but 86% of participants chose to use the internet. 1,200 of the city's 15,000 inhabitants participated in the discussion and 72% of them reported that they found the experience democratically useful. Participants were registered and issued with a password, so as to ensure that only those entitled to vote could do so and that they only voted once. Internet access was made available for local people via schools and libraries, so that nobody was excluded because of the digital divide.

For information: See *http://www.votia.com*

Australia

In June 2000, the Australian Prime Minister and Minister of Defence launched a review of defence policy ahead of the publication of a White Paper (policy paper). As part of this review, a discussion paper, entitled *Defence Review 2000 – Our Future Defence Force*, was released for public consultation.

A consultation page was established on the Department of Defence web site, which included an electronic consultation kit including a copy of the discussion paper, a summary of the paper for easy access to key points, an electronic response form posing questions on the key points in the discussion paper, and a schedule of public meetings. The consultation lasted for nine weeks, during which time over 2,000 people attended 28 community meetings and over 1,150 written submissions were received – approximately half by e-mail. The White Paper secretariat received 5,316 e-mail messages and the discussion paper was downloaded from the web site 6,453 times.

For information: See *http://www.defence.gov.au/consultation2/index.htm*

Netherlands

In his role as the Minister for Inner City Problems and Integration of Minorities, and the member of the Dutch Government whose task it is to think about democracy, Minister Van Boxtel worked closely with the IPP (Institute for the Public and Politics) to create an inclusive and interactive online consultation.

For six months from October 1999, Minister Van Boxtel participated in a series of live chats and web discussions. The live chat was with the Minister, a senior broadcaster, a moderator, and a typist. The moderator, Dr Steven Lenos of the IPP, was the medium through which the participants communicated with the Minister during the web discussions. Lenos provided selected questions for the Minister's attention to which he replied. The moderation meant that the Minister only saw those questions that Lenos deemed relevant during the web discussions. However, the live chat sessions were set on an unmediated platform in which remarks, jokes and questions were all shown to him.

The web discussions had four categories of participant: the moderator, the politician, individual citizens and civil servants. The civil servants were participating as representatives of the government – which was unique, according to Lenos, because in Dutch politics the Minister is always responsible and it is he who communicates with the public. In these discussions, civil servants were mandated to participate as experts on a topic, thus bringing them out into the open.

Lenos estimates that approximately 50 people participated in the three debates that ran consecutively each month and there were about 200 messages. On the live chat there were twice the number of questions that the Minister could cope with; 40-60 questions could be tackled in an hour. He is aware that some people do not play a participatory role, just taking an interest in the initiative and the points raised. The users gave a name on entry but anonymity was possible.

A resumé was put on the site each week to enable people who had joined in the middle of a debate to be aware of the issue at hand. It also provided a general idea of the arguments and comments already raised.

Advertising for the project was done in three ways:
- A press release through the traditional media, including national radio and television and some magazines; due to the novelty of a Minister taking part in a live chat there was quite a large amount of coverage prior to and during the six months it was active.
- Online publicity whereby advertisements were sent to government web site, 'e-zine', and e-mail newsletter editors.
- Advertising on e-mail lists.
- Minister Van Boxtel gave an exclusive interview with one of the national newspapers and mentioned the live web discussion and provided the web address.

The University of Amsterdam is doing an evaluation of the project, part of which involves research into why people did not go back online after one experience. The university's evaluation will be combined with those being completed by the IPP and the Ministry. In all, there are 15 recommendations, including that the web site should be continued, used as an innovative example to other ministries, bridging the gap between citizens and government

For more information: *http:www.publiek-politiek.nl/English;*
http://www.ministervanboxtel.nl

Canada

Energy Technology Futures (ETF) was created primarily as a research project to look at greenhouse gas emissions and economic growth in the future. Many different technologies were examined to establish their potential and limitations in this field. Kevin Cliffe, the director of the project and Paul Khanna, the science and planning analyst who co-ordinated and moderated the virtual conference, used scenario-based methods, and held focus groups and workshops to gather research material. The participants in these meetings were from government, private sector research organisations and NGOs – often experts in a related subject (for example, a representative of Environment Canada).

There were a variety of discussions within the face-to-face meetings and at the virtual conference. These were broken down to include education, technology, fossil fuels and materials. Although the 'real' meetings were exclusive, anyone could register to join the 'chat'. The material that was covered in the face-to-face meetings was posted on the web site and the virtual conferences were subsequently set up in order for people from all over the world to register and look at the information that had been gathered and provide their comments.

The web site had 8,000 hits, 3,000 more than anticipated. It is thought that 5-6,000 of these were unique. About 235 people registered for the virtual conference and a further 800 were involved with the workshops and focus groups, contributing to the site. Khanna suggests that 15% of those with an initial interest went on to register and become more involved. Although anyone was able to register, the comments posted were moderated: they went to a restricted area where Khanna approved them before they were posted. The worry was that a message might be unsavoury but all messages were published on the site. The moderation was carried out every few days, which means that although interaction and comment were active, they were not live.

The aim of the web site was to broaden the debate and awareness from beyond the workshop participants to anyone who was able to find the links. Subsequently it is the intention to use the views of the wider audience to influence policy decision which will be used in ETF's strategic planning processes in the future.

The most accessible means by which the site could be entered was through the ETF web site, the main portal for communication, which contains a lot of other information as well as the link and registration to the virtual conference. Khanna and Cliffe distributed their web address to all the search engines so that anyone in the world working on energy futures or energy technology would come in contact with the link. This makes sense as it is estimated that 95% of users were already online. A Climate Change Secretariat web site was also set up which involved players from ETF, environment Canada, Industry Canada, Department of Finance, Department of International Trade and Foreign Affairs and the Privy Council Office; the hotlinks here meant users could directly access any of the aforementioned central government departments as well.

Although selective, another way people found out about the conference was through business cards handed out at the workshops and focus groups. However, the subject matter prescribes that users were most likely to make contact only if they had a work-related or personal interest in climate change. Many of the users found out about the conference by word of mouth.

If people had comments but could not post their message up personally they could make contact with Khanna who could perform the task for them. There was no obligation to join the discussion more than once although most people did in order to see either a response to their own message or the direction or outcome of the debate.

As an international exercise, the success is evident by the fact that the participants were mainly from Canada but also the US, the UK and to a lesser extent mainland Europe, Asia and Africa. There was a large proportion of students who participated and although the specific consultation is no longer officially functioning – it ran for 18 months – people from the Philippines and Africa continue to show an interest.

Cliffe considers that there was educative value for both the project organisers and the participants:

We were able to get expert comments and the participants would not only see what was going on within their particular sector of expertise but were also able to browse other areas relating to energy technologies and were able to get a bit more of a holistic view of the entire issue.

Participants received a final brochure, increasing their understanding of the policy issues under consideration during the consultation. They were also invited to give feedback, for which four workshops were set up – two in Canada and two in Europe. One was in London and it served for information exchange in order to establish some synergies, improved collaboration and consultation across continents.

As a result of the virtual conference, the profile of the subject matter as shown by ETF has been raised. The research that the department undertook is now on federal government web sites and it seems they have contributed to an agenda for best practice virtual consultations within government in Canada. Cliffe says that the most important thing to remember when doing an online consultation is to keep it 'simple, simple, simple!'

For more information: *http://www.nrcan.gc.ca/es/etf/*

Scotland

An online consultation was carried out by the International Teledemocracy Centre (ITC) at Napier University in Edinburgh, Scotland. The education division of the Scottish Executive commissioned the research to consult young people living in Scotland – particularly 11-18 year-olds. They wanted to know how to shape their policy on issues that would affect this age group. It was not a traditional consultation: there was no consultation document, but rather a number of issues on which the Executive required comment.

Young people are difficult to reach. The ITC publicised the project in schools – 20 of which they approached directly – and registered youth centres and voluntary groups in the community education sector. Adverts were placed in the *Younger Scot*, and the *Daily Record,* and banner ads were placed on *trouble.co.uk* and *neighbours.com.*

This six-week project provided a means by which the young people who took part had direct influence on the agenda for the Scottish Youth Summit 2000. This was due to the Executive deciding on issues to be addressed only after they had asked the target group what they would like to debate. The consultation provided unique opportunities for young people in three key ways:
• They were able to participate and contribute to their democracy, fulfilling a sense of achievement and hopefully encouraging a further interest in politics;
• The electronic means by which the target group took part is likely to have increased their own knowledge, especially if they were not in the habit of using the internet prior to the consultation.
• Cyber networks and friendships were formed to enable young people from all over Scotland to make contact with each other, increasing interactivity and decreasing ignorance that may exist between different types of communities.

As a confidence-building exercise, an online consultation can be more significant for young people than any other social group. Due to the anonymity of web-based discussions, participants need not feel intimidated in any way about their writing skills or their opinions being viewed in a bad light. It could be seen from the responses that some participants had a low literacy level, but that had not been a bar to access. The creation of the consultation had particularly taken into consideration those users who were partially sighted.

587 comments were received, 279 of which were from participants who went on to vote on the different issues presented to them. 600 people visited the site. That number is based on 760 home page impressions.

Although the aim was that the users would join the debate more than once to discuss the issues and vote on a variety of subjects, it became apparent that due to lack of ease of access, many people only made one appearance, voting at the same time. Alongside this issue, there are three practical factors that the ITC would want to address in a future consultation among a total of eight recommendations:

• The dates, 2 May – 12 June, coincided with an examination period in Scotland so there was less interest than there would have been at any other time of year;
• The online and offline publicity needed to be more specifically aimed at young people;
• The look and feel of the web site needed to be more attractive to young people.

The consultation was followed up with a one-day 'real space' conference, with 10 workshops, each addressing one of the issues that had been discussed online. Ministers were present and there was opportunity for both them and the young people to join the debate and air their views.

For more information: *www.e-consultant.org.co;*
http://www.teledemocracy.org/ourwork/our-work-projects.htm#consultations;
http://www.teledemocracy.org

France

Source d'Europe is a joint initiative between the French government and the European Union in the form of five interactive forums in five different web sites. The initiative offers an online platform for the discussion of European policy issues. Key points are:

• A summary of proposals and trends that have been discussed over the previous seven days are published on the site each week. This is to enable users to gain a speedy understanding of the topic before they contribute to the discussion.
• The public who take part in the five debates do so in the knowledge that their opinion on an issue will count – they are given a ministerial guarantee that their comments will be carefully examined by the *Source d'Europe* steering group. People with experience and knowledge in a specific EU related subject will put time and effort into any comment or suggestion they might provide, knowing that it is being taken seriously. This encourages an exchange of information which grants the site and the participants educative value, as well as giving the steering group succinct arguments on which to put forward any policy agenda that might come about as a result of the online discussion.
• It is apparent that the same small group of participants come back again and again. Although contributions from all citizens are encouraged, there is a danger of participants dominating debate by a consistent presence or by giving an aggressive response to the comments of others. Consequently, this can result in discouraging others who would like to contribute but feel it is not worthwhile.
• As a platform for discussion on topics that touch the lives of so many, it is inevitable that some participants use the forum to vent their anger. For this reason, all the debates are moderated; insulting or personal comments aimed at individuals are not displayed.
• Citizens could learn about the five web sites through postcards which were distributed by every préfecture in every region in France, by the town halls of all the arrondissement in Paris, by the Office

of the European Commission in Paris and by a number of NGOs involved in European Affairs. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also carried out a press campaign. However, Morgane Lesage, who works on one of the forums, states that in a future consultation of this sort there should be better advertising in order to target a broader spectrum of people.

• Lesage indicates that some participants have formed cyber-communities and join the web sites to discuss issues almost everyday. She sees this as very positive and says there is usually an exchange of very different views, encouraging tolerance and acceptance of people who hold varying beliefs.

As the consultations have not been completed yet, it is impossible to identify ways in which the consultation has had influence or an impact upon policy decision. However, Lesage has said that the results of *Sources d'Europe* will be used in an official state document. Due to the high profile connections this project has in France and the EU as well as its controversial subject matter, it seems that this is a space to be watched.

For more information: *www.info-europe.fr/debat*

Denmark

In 2000 the County of North Jutland launched the Digital Administration programme, within which was the Democracy Project. The task of the Democracy Project was to create an electronic forum for e-democratic dialogue among citizens and politicians, with a particular aim towards November 20, 2001: County Council Election Day (which later turned out also to be General Election Day).

In 1997, North Jutland experienced the lowest voter turnout in the Danish election. The object of the Democracy Project was to make visible the decisions made on a regional political level, and to involve the citizens in the process of democracy. Specifically, the County Council also wanted to reach first-time voters, who were known to show a low turnout.

Citizens, politicians and first-time voters were invited to take part in the project. The result was a very lively and well-visited web site with a good dialogue among citizens and politicians.

The guidelines for the design of the project were created in focus group meetings with 'adult' citizens, politicians and first-time voters. Here, the groups were asked to define their requirements for a web site representing democracy in North Jutland. The essential conclusions reached in these sessions were that the dialogue between citizens and politicians should be a central element of the web site. The citizens wanted 'to get to know the politicians' and to be involved in political planning at an early stage of the process.

It was agreed that this was not intended as a place for municipal or county officers to provide answers to citizens' problems; rather it should accommodate an open debate between citizens and the politicians.

The web site was designed in close cooperation between the project group of the County of North Jutland and KMD, a large Danish IT consultant. KMD also contributed to producing the user survey and in defining the design of the web site.

The web site *www.nordpol.dk* was structured with a forum for debates as the central element.
In addition, the site included:
• A presentation of candidates and lists (produced by the politicians personally)
• A chat room (enabling young people to chat with youth politicians and front-runners)
• A calendar of political arrangements and dates of relevance to the elections.
• News sites, where the daily news was available from the regional broadcasting station.
• A quiz with prizes to win
• An info page with information on the elections and the public sector.
• A search function.

The design was based on a wish to create a sympathetic, inviting and friendly image, which would not put off young people at the first click.

During the project period of 10 September to 20 November, *www.nordpol.dk* had 23,000 visitors and 440 contributions to the debate. The total traffic was shared between the debate, the chat and visits to the politicians' profiles.

The reason for *www.nordpol.dk* being so well visited and used to such a degree is partly to be found in the extensive involvement of users, in particular the candidates for the county council who received comprehensive and repeated information about the project, and partly in the profiling potentials of participating and providing information.

For more information: *www.nordpol.dk*

References

Amnå, E (2000) *Sustainable Democracy: Policy for Government by the People in the 21st Century. English summary of the report of the Government Commission on Swedish Democracy*. Official Government Reports (SOU 2000:1). Stockholm, Fritzes; Online at *http://www.governments-online.org/articles/5.shtml*

Axelrod, R. (1984) *The Evolution of Cooperation*. New York: Basic Books.

Berst, J. (1997) *Intelligent Filters To the Rescue! (Sort of...)*. ZDNet AnchorDesk, at *http://www.zdnet.com/anchordesk/story/story_1035.html*

Bishop, G.F., Oldendick, R.W., Tuchfarber, A.J. and Bennett, S.E. (1980), 'Pseudo-Opinions on Public Affairs', *Public Opinion Quarterly 44*, pp.198-208

Blumler, J.G. and Coleman, S (2001) *Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace*, IPPR/Citizens Online

Bohman, J (1996) *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity and Democracy*, MIT Press

Burke, E., (1854-6) *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* Vol. I, pp.446-8, London: Henry G. Bohn

Coleman, S and Normann, E (2000) *New Media & Social Inclusion*, Hansard Society

Communities Online, http://www.co-democracy.org/

Dalton, R.J., Burklin, W. and Drummond, A. (2001) 'Public Opinion and Direct Democracy', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 12, No 4, Oct. 2001, pp.141-153

Dewey, J. (1927) *The Public and Its Problems*, Henry Holt & Co, NY

Dimock, M.A. and Popkin, S.L. (1997), 'Political Knowledge in Comparative Perspective' in Iyenar, S. and Reeves, R. (eds), *Do The Media Govern? Politicians, Voters, and Reporters in America* Sage

Dryzek, J. (2000), *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*, Oxford University Press

Dumbill, E. (2001) Quote from the About page on writetheweb.com (October 2001)

Eliasoph, N. (1998) *Avoiding Politics: How Americans produce apathy in everyday life*, Cambridge University Press

Fishkin, J.S. (1995) *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion & Democracy*, Yale University Press

Goss, S. (1999) *Managing Working with the Public*, Kogan Page

Graham, Brad L (1999) *Why I Weblog*. http://www.bradlands.com/words/maybe/maybe02.html

Gualtieri, R. (1999) *Impact of the Emerging Information Society on the Policy Development Process and Democratic Policy* PUMA, OECD

Heller, K et al (1984) *Psychology and Community Change. Challenges of the Future*. 2nd ed. Brooks & Cole. Pacific Grove, California

Kim, Amy Jo (1998) 9 *Timeless Principles For Building Community – Erecting The Social Scaffolding*. *In Web Techniques* 1998/1. http://kulesh.org/jotting/lessons.htm

Kass, G. (2000), *Open Channels*, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, London

Katz, J (2001) *Here Come The Weblogs*. On SlashDot May 24, 1999. http://slashdot.org/features/99/05/13/1832251.shtml

Lippmann, W. (1922) *Public Opinion*, Macmillan

Mill, J.S. (1991) *John Stuart Mill On Liberty and Other Essays* (edited by John Gray), OUP

Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, Netherlands (1998) *Electronic Civic Consultation: A guide to the use of the Internet in interactive policy making*, Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations

Morris, D (2001) 'Direct Democracy and the Internet', *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review*, Vol. 34, No.3

Morrison, J. and Newman, D. (2001) 'On-line Citizenship: Consultation and Participation in New Labour's Britain and Beyond', *International Review of Law*, Vol 15, No 2, pp.171-194

Nichani, M & V Rajamanickam (2001) Grassroots KM through blogging. Elearningpost 14 May 2001. http://www.elearningpost.com/elthemes/blog.asp

OECD, (2001) *Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making*, PUMA, OECD

Ostrom, Elinor. (1990) *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. New York: Cambridge University Press

Petters, John Durham (1999), 'Public Journalism and Democratic Theory: Four Challenges' in T.D. Glasser (ed), *The Idea of Public Journalism*, The Guilford Press

Powazek, D M (2001) *Design for Community: The Art of Connecting Real People in Virtual Places*. Indianapolis: New Riders Publishing

Public administration Committee, UK House of Commons (2001) *Public Participation: Issues and Innovations*, Vol II, Minutes of Evidence and Appendices, The Stationery Office

Putnam, R (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster

Shanmugasundaram, Kulesh (2001) *Weblogging: Lessons learned*

Snellen, I. (2000/1) 'ICTs and the Future of Democracy', *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy*, Winter 2000/2001

Sunstein, C. (2001), *Republic.com*, Princeton University Press

Young, Iris M (1990) *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, N.J

Webzine JOHO, 17 June 2001 (available at http://www.hyperorg.com/backissues/joho-jun17-01.html#threads)

Wenger, E (2001) Supporting communities of practice – A survey of Community-oriented technologies. Version 1.3, March 2001 (available at http://www.ewenger.com/tech/)

White, N (2001) Facilitating and Hosting a Virtual Community. Online publication at http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communityfacilitation.htm

White, N & S Boettcher (2000) Hosts on Hosting. Online publication at http://www.fullcirc.com/community/hostsonhosts.htm

Yankelovich, D. (1991) *Coming To Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*, Syracuse University Press

Zolo, D. (1992), Democracy and Complexity: A Realist Approach, Polity Press