

E-Consultation: Enabling Democracy between Elections

Joseph Peters
and Manon Abud

With comments by
Kathleen McNutt
Colin McKay

Strengthening Canadian Democracy



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This publication was produced under the direction of Geneviève Bouchard, Research Director, IRPP. The manuscript was copy-edited by Barry Norris, proofreading was by Mary Williams, production was by Chantal Létourneau, art direction was by Schumacher Design and printing was by AGL Graphiques.

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To cite this document:

Peters, Joseph, and Manon Abud. 2008.

"E-Consultation: Enabling Democracy between Elections"
With comments by Kathleen McNutt and Colin McKay.
Choices 15 (1).

Strengthening Canadian Democracy / Renforcer la démocratie canadienne

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Since the 1960s, increased levels of education and changing social values have prompted calls for increased democratic participation, both in Canada and internationally. Some modest reforms have been implemented in this country, but for the most part the avenues provided for public participation lag behind the demand. The Strengthening Canadian Democracy research program explores some of the democratic lacunae in Canada's political system. In proposing reforms, the focus is on how the legitimacy of our system of government can be strengthened before disengagement from politics and public alienation accelerate unduly.

Depuis les années 1960, le relèvement du niveau d'éducation et l'évolution des valeurs sociales ont suscité au Canada comme ailleurs des appels en faveur d'une participation démocratique élargie. Si quelques modestes réformes ont été mises en œuvre dans notre pays, les mesures envisagées pour étendre cette participation restent largement insuffisantes au regard de la demande exprimée. Ce programme de recherche examine certaines des lacunes démocratiques du système canadien et propose des réformes qui amélioreraient la participation publique, s'intéressant par le fait même aux moyens d'affermir la légitimité de notre système de gouvernement pour contrer le désengagement de plus en plus marqué de la population vis-à-vis de la politique.



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E-Consultation: Enabling Democracy between Elections

Joseph Peters
and Manon Abud

Canada exists in a state of democratic discontent or deficit. There is ample evidence to illustrate that trust, respect and the perceived relevance of our democratic institutions are in question. Change is beginning to take place. While not the panacea to our democratic challenges, public involvement through e-consultation approaches may be a piece of the complex solution to reducing apathy, increasing trust and establishing a new relationship with Canadians. E-consultations facilitate getting beyond the “usual suspects” by expanding perspectives and enriching the sources of input into democratic decision-making processes.

E-consultation successes abound in the Canadian context, but are not often documented or celebrated. This study aims to explore e-consultation from various perspectives: definitions, tools, examples and best practices. The authors’ objective is to present the strengths and weaknesses of e-consultation in theory and practice, but also to provide evidence of this position as a valuable, if not essential, part of a new era of democratic governance.¹ To that end, this study

- explores the democratic deficit and the need for new democratic governance;
- introduces public involvement and e-consultation as new approaches in democratic governance;
- presents several e-consultation case studies from Parliament, public administration and the third sector; and
- outlines recommendations and challenges for the future.

E-consultation is an emerging approach and a tangible opportunity for Canadian democratic institutions to make better decisions through an engaged public.

A Need for New Democratic Governance

The current state of affairs

Raymond Williams provides an enduring perspective of democratic governance in *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*, published in 1958.

In today's context it is still relevant and in retrospect prophetic: "If people cannot have official democracy, they will have unofficial democracy, in any of its possible forms, from the armed revolt, through 'unofficial' strikes or restrictions of labour, to the quietest but most alarming form – a general sullenness and withdrawal of interest" (315).

This warning resonates with more relevance today than it did 50 years ago. Given the context of societal change in which Raymond was writing, he presents the idea that a withdrawal of interest is worse than armed revolts and protest. Such events call the health of democracy into question. If one considers the decline in voter participation over the past several decades in Canada as a proxy for withdrawal of interest, then by Raymond's definition the health of our democracy is in question.

The democratic deficit

Canada cannot claim ownership of the term "democratic deficit" – British parliamentarian William Dunn asserts that he was the first to coin the phrase. He used "democratic deficit" to characterize the distance and disconnect between the European Union and the citizens of its member countries (Newton Dunn 1988). In Canada, this term has been fodder for opposition parties and occasionally ruminated on by those in government. Consecutive governments at the federal level have had cabinet positions with responsibility for democratic renewal. By this action alone, one might conclude that there must indeed be a deficit or that something is wrong with democracy if it is in need of renewal.

Definitions

From a definitional standpoint, there are a couple of schools of thought on what the democratic deficit is. Most of the literature focuses on the decline in attitudes, action, engagement and civic literacy relative to previous eras. The most popular symptoms are low voter turnout, lower participation in political parties, and declining trust in political leadership and democratic institutions (see Howe and Northrup

2000; Pammet and LeDuc 2003; Institute on Governance 2005; Milan 2005; EKOS 2006; Milner 2007). Another perspective centres on the idea that there is a gap between the preferences of a population and the action taken. This deficit is more about an inability to deliver on the results a population desires (see Pilon 2001; Conrad 2003; Rebick 2001; Axworthy 2004; Heath n.d.). The definition of the population can shift in this perspective from just those interested in or affected by certain policies to the general population. The common definitions of "democratic deficit" in the Canadian literature thus focus either on a relative decline in participation and trust or on a preference gap in decision-making. Evidence of the decline is abundant, but evidence of the preference gap is more subtle and nuanced.

Evidence

The overall trend in voter turnout has been declining since the Second World War, with three major drops in 1953, 1974 and 1980. Recently, the decline has been more steady and prolonged, and Canada has come to an interesting crossroads in voter turnout: in the past four elections, the number of Canadians who were eligible to vote and did not was larger than the number who voted for the winning party. Younger cohorts are also less likely to vote and do not view doing so either as essential or a part of their civic duty (see O'Neill 2001; Pammet and LeDuc 2003; Milan 2005; Milner 2007).

Data show that trust in political leadership has been in decline since the 1960s. Overall interest and participation in political parties have also followed a steady decline. This picture is augmented by a 16 percent decrease between 1998 and 2006 in the number of Canadians who say they discuss politics and political affairs with family and friends (EKOS 2006). A number of studies also point to a decline in public deliberation. Nevitte's and Axworthy's evidence points to a decline in the interest in and function of political parties (see, for example, Nevitte 1996; Axworthy 2004).

Deliberation is also hampered by the media's superficial coverage of political actors and issues, especially when combined with the concentration or consolidation of power within the media (Nadeau and Giasson 2005). Paquet argues that citizens are frustrated by the slow and disjointed response of governance to an increasingly dynamic and pluralistic environment, and that the deficit is related to governance structures and decision-making (1999). Research also shows that there is a gap between how much people *want* to be involved

and how much they feel that they *are* involved in decision-making and governance (EKOS 2006).

Solutions

The solutions are not as clear as the evidence, which should not come as a surprise. The potential solutions are complex to implement, and it could take considerable time to see their benefits. An exploration of several recommended courses of action points to interesting conclusions.

The most common prescriptions and attempts to solve the democratic deficit have been manifested in changes to the voting system. At the provincial level, we have seen attempts to move to proportional representation in British Columbia, Ontario, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island over the past several years. The idea with this solution is that the value of a vote changes with proportional representation, so that electors will be more likely to cast their votes if they feel their participation has yielded a greater degree of efficacy or tangible results of their participation.

Both O'Neill and Milner point to youth as the solution. O'Neill notes the need to promote the importance of voting among young Canadians (2001); at best, however, this would solve only the voting-turnout challenge of the democratic deficit. Milner's focus, instead, is on increasing the political knowledge of young Canadians — a course of action that might affect more elements of the deficit, though it likely would take generations to make a difference (2007).

Axworthy argues that the deficit should be addressed by changing the role of political parties, which need to have an increased responsibility for public discourse (2004). This is consistent with another solution that calls for leadership and political will to address the democratic deficit (Institute on Governance 2005). A significant challenge lies in the power of the status quo. It has been too good, historically, for the two major political parties in Canada to suggest that either would support or accept significant change to the current system.

O'Neill also points to a different discourse than that of Axworthy, suggesting that change can take place through an increased dialogue with Canadians (2001). Paquet agrees to an extent, but prescribes subsidiarity and citizen-based evaluation and feedback in decision-making.² In his opinion, this would ensure legitimacy and responsiveness in governance. Dialogue and mechanisms to allow an engaged citi-

zenry are seen as two potential solutions to the democratic deficit (Paquet 1999).

Democratic deficit conclusions

These are just a few of the potential courses of action for relieving the democratic deficit. The comprehensive exploration of this current state of affairs and its potential solutions would warrant another study in and of itself. Regardless of the precise diagnosis and symptoms of our democratic illness, we must consider opportunities to address our state of disengagement through a shift to new forms of democratic governance. Based on the exploration of several proposed solutions, there is a clear role for an increase in meaningful public involvement. This would improve the discourse, increase the dialogue and engage the public in the decision-making processes of our democratic institutions.

Public Involvement and E-Consultation

Democratic governance is much broader than public involvement, which is just one of many different ways to contribute to democratic governance. E-consultation, in turn, is merely a form of public involvement that takes place over a different medium: the Internet. We propose the definition that e-consultation is the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) to involve the public (citizens and/or stakeholders) through different forms of interaction with our democratic institutions, with the intention to elicit inputs that contribute to more sustainable or robust decision-making.

Within public involvement and e-consultation, there is a host of related definitions and terminology to navigate. Citizen engagement, deliberative dialogue, public consultation and public involvement are often used interchangeably. Here, we use "public involvement," as we believe it is a more inclusive definition, in which the other concepts are subsumed.

E-consultation can address several elements of the democratic deficit. One is the idea of closing the gap between expectations and what is actually delivered. E-consultation can assist in understanding and, where possible, alleviating the gap. Another area is civic literacy: e-consultation can present the different perspectives on an issue and facilitate a deliberative

exploration. The final link to the democratic deficit is made through the e-consultation process itself, which allows the public to engage in civic discourse and dialogue.

There are other arguments that support the case for e-consultation. Coleman and Gøtze presented a strong case for e-consultation in their popular piece *Bowling Together*, in which they argued for mass adoption of e-consultation in the United Kingdom, where the Internet use rate was just 50 percent at the time (2002). Adoption rates have now reached such levels that it is difficult to argue against the ubiquity of the Internet. In Canada, Internet use hovers around 73 percent (Statistics Canada 2008), and the circle of life (youth becoming older) will ensure that this number grows. High-speed or broadband access is still a challenge for rural citizens, but with many e-consultation tools high speed is not a factor, since our public institutions like to work with the lowest common denominator, or a least a lower technological and bandwidth denominator, for the most part.³ Regardless of these other factors, the Internet is a communications medium that a large majority of Canadians are using. Our democratic institutions' relevance to citizens and stakeholders can come into question if they fail to reach people through this commonly adopted medium.

Internet adoption rates among youth (those ages 16 to 24), at 96 percent, are much higher than among the general public (Statistics Canada 2008). The Internet is the medium of choice for young people today. The challenge for e-consultation hosts is to get through the noise. The question that needs to be asked is: Can government reach 19-year-olds who have YouTube, iTunes and Facebook running simultaneously on their screens? Ironically, the same accessibility standards that aim at allowing low bandwidth and access for persons with disabilities end up excluding youth. It is a breach of those guidelines to engage young people through the many new and emerging technologies they choose to interact with over the Internet.

While it is still evolving, one can safely conclude that the Internet is well established as a communications medium. However, our democratic institutions are still trying to figure out the best means to engage citizens and stakeholders over the Internet. E-consultation is one means. To develop an understanding of e-consultation and public involvement more broadly, we explore several issues. First, we develop a definition of who the "public" is in public involvement.

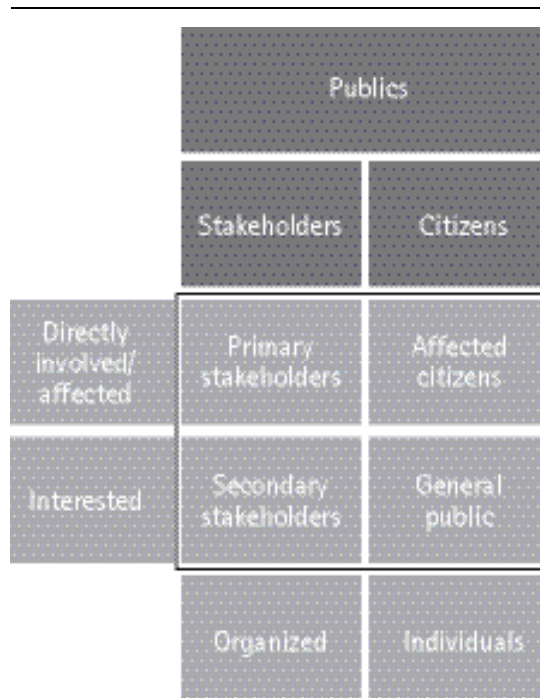
Second, we examine when and how public involvement can contribute to decision-making and policy development. Third, we look at the different types of interactions that can be initiated between the host and participants through e-consultation. We then make a link to specific e-consultation tools and carry them over to several case studies.

The public in "public" involvement

The "public" in public involvement should be seen as the different publics to be engaged. For some initiatives, the publics might be narrowed to target audiences and stakeholders. For others, the publics might include affected citizens, interested parties or even the general population.

As shown in figure 1, this model presents the publics through several important lenses. The first breaks the publics into citizens and stakeholders. The defining difference between stakeholders and citizens from our perspective is that stakeholders are organized entities of some size or scale. Broadly, a stakeholder provides an organized or organizational perspective on an issue, while a citizen provides an individual perspective. (Experts and academics offer exceptions in certain cases: an expert might not be affiliated with an organization, though most are; an academic might provide an individual perspective even though affiliated with an institution.)

Figure 1
A Model of the Publics



The next criterion – that of being directly involved in or affected by an issue – adds a public involvement lens to this model. The idea is that those who are involved or affected should have their perspectives considered at some point in a democratic decision-making process. There is also a spectrum to this criterion: some citizens might be greatly affected, while others might be only marginally affected.

We have seen that stakeholders and experts attempt to convey that they represent the viewpoint of individual members or citizens. We have found this representation to be lacking in democratic fundamentals. It is common for organizations to take the paternalistic view that “we know what is best for our members and those we represent,” rather than presenting the actual results of a broad engagement of those they represent. Our conclusions lead us to the view that citizens and stakeholders who are involved and affected need to be engaged in public involvement and democratic decision-making.

Next comes the criterion of whether or not the public is interested. This suggests a second tier of the public, but we are not suggesting a two-tiered form of democracy – we believe both tiers need to be engaged. This might take different forms; at a minimum, however, it is essential for the perspectives of those involved in or affected by the issue to be considered.

How public should public involvement be?

A common concern in public involvement is the issue of representativeness, recruitment and the sampling approaches that should be used. Some feel that without the use of a random sample, a public involvement initiative is of little use from a research perspective, arguing that results then cannot be generalized or extrapolated but can be considered only the sum of the views of hundreds or thousands of participants.

There is, however, a fundamental flaw to this logic: a random sample can be used in a public involvement initiative, although it might be inappropriate. One can argue that if the consultation is to be public, it might therefore need to be open broadly to the public to participate. We contend that, for many public involvement initiatives, open or self-selected participation is warranted, if not required. If the public involvement is intended to give the interested public an opportunity to offer its perspective, then a closed initiative would be inappropriate and would be seen as “undemocratic” by those with an interest in contributing. This is not to say that broad representation from different interests is not desirable. On the contrary, active communi-

cations efforts are essential to inform and engage diverse and inclusive perspectives.

Another argument to consider is the idea that democracy is active. While all citizens have the right to vote, only those who actively decide to vote contribute. The fact that there is an overrepresentation of seniors and an underrepresentation of youth does not invalidate the results of an election. We argue that it is not contradictory to think that a democratic public involvement initiative should accommodate all those interested in participating.

A major concern is interest group manipulation of the public involvement activity. While a valid concern, in our experience, its likelihood is exaggerated, especially in an e-consultation context. Depending on the approach and the tools used, the potential for interest group manipulation can be kept readily in check.⁴

Public involvement and decision-making

Several symptoms of and solutions to the democratic deficit are tied to engaging citizens in decision-making. For public involvement to be considered genuine, it must be able to contribute to the decision-making process. This is not to say that the public should make the ultimate decision, but that its input must be considered and used by those requesting public involvement. A public involvement initiative that is a public relations exercise or a “check box” in the policy development process does more to increase the democratic deficit and the public’s corresponding cynicism and apathy. Even if they have the best of intentions, public involvement initiatives also need to be analytically responsible – poorly designed initiatives that cannot respectfully consider the input received merely increase the democratic deficit, perhaps even more so than initiatives designed as no more than public relations exercises. Asking for input is not enough. There has to be the will and means to use the input if skepticism and cynicism are not to prevail.

A decision-making model

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) provides training services and organizes conferences for public involvement practitioners around the world. The IAP2 has been successful in creating a common understanding of the principles and tools for public participation. In its training courses, it presents a five-step decision-making model (see figure 2). Our experience has shown, however, that this decision-making model is missing two important

postdecision steps that could benefit from public involvement – namely, implementation and evaluation (see figure 3). Engaging stakeholders or citizens in the implementation or evaluation of the decision could have tremendous utility, which the model in figure 2 does not capture.

The IAP2 makes an important observation about the relationship between public involvement and the decision-making model – that public involvement may take place at any step of the decision-making model. The emphasis is on *may*. Different initiatives require public involvement at different stages; different publics may also participate at different stages, with experts and stakeholders at one stage and the general public at another. The public appreciates the opportunity to contribute as long as its role and the intended use of its contribution are effectively conveyed. Coleman and Gøtze suggest that citizens do not want to govern, they want to be heard (2002).

To help illustrate the potential for different roles, figure 4 presents a model of a fictional decision-making sequence, one in which stakeholders, citizens and the democratic institution contribute to different stages of the decision-making process. The model is not a prescription; rather, it is an example of public involvement at different stages in the decision-making life cycle. This depiction is helpful in several ways. First, it conveys the point that public involve-

ment does not equate with the devolution of decision-making to the public. In most instances, it is about allowing the public to contribute to the formulation of the decision. A referendum is the comparatively rare example of allowing the public to make the final decision regarding a public policy issue. Second, the depiction assists in determining the intent and design of the public involvement. By first understanding the purpose of the input to be requested from the public, the appropriate tools and approach can then be selected. Finally, this model and example attempt to convey the idea that each public involvement exercise is different, and that interactions with the public can and should change on an issue-by-issue basis.

What the public can contribute

The public can contribute in a variety of different ways to democratic decision-making, including exploring, validating and reconciling ideas (see figure 5 on page 8).

With exploring ideas, the focus is on divergent input and conversations, whereby the public can bring ideas, suggestions, information and perspectives into the decision-making process. The public can also be engaged to validate ideas and allow the decision-maker to check ideas with the on-the-ground perspective. The third contribution that the public can provide relates to reconciliation of diverse ideas. These are more convergent discussions that emphasize trade offs and the weighing of values. Thus, the design and intent of the public involve-

Figure 2
International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Decision-Making Model

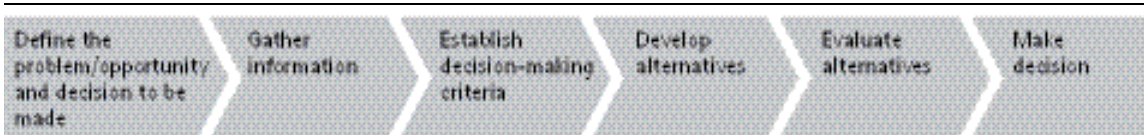


Figure 3
Expanded Decision-Making Model

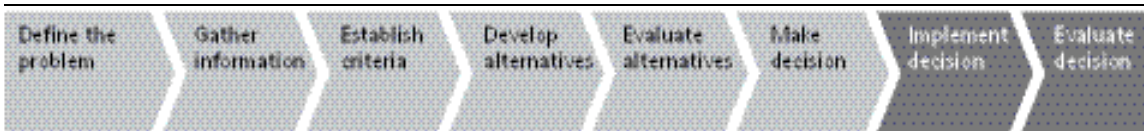


Figure 4
Example of Decision-Making Model with Phases of Public Involvement

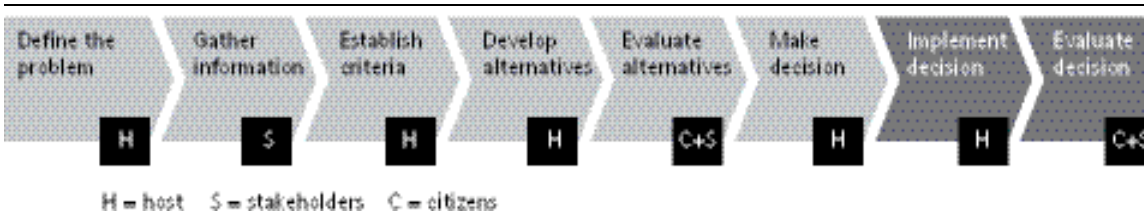
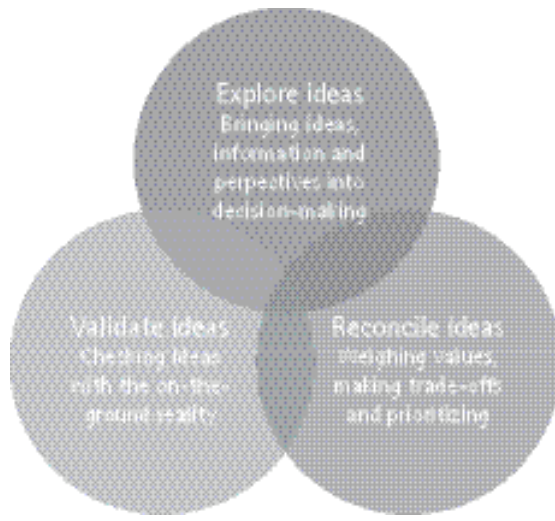


Figure 5
The Public's Contributions



ment initiative can call for exploration, validation and reconciliation. These are not mutually exclusive concepts – this is the rationale for presenting these public contributions in figure 5 as a Venn diagram: one public involvement initiative might be designed to explore an issue and validate (or invalidate) options, while another might encompass all three types of input.

This model should not be interpreted as precluding the public from making other contributions. Rather, its intent is to convey the different perspectives and input that public involvement can provide decision-makers.

What the public needs in order to contribute

Leighninger argues that our democratic institutions need to break away from a paternalistic parent-child relationship (2006). Citizens are demanding a change, so a shift to adult-to-adult conversations is required if we are to create a new and meaningful form of democracy. Part of that shift to adult conversations is moving from opinion to deliberation and informed participation. The public needs to be provided with a sense of efficacy – with a sense of how its contributions will be used. This does not imply a devolution of decision-making to the public. On the contrary, the use of the public input must be appropriately scoped and conveyed to participants, as presented in the decision-making models above.

Public involvement approaches try to distance themselves from the top-of-mind opinion that polling and surveys tend to emphasize. For example, the intent of James Fishkin's Deliberative Poll is present in its name (see Fishkin 1991, 1995, 2000; Fishkin

and Laslett 2003). But whether it is a citizen jury, a national issues forum or an on-line workbook, thoughtful consideration or deliberation of the issue is essential.

For informed deliberative public involvement to take place, a baseline of civic literacy around the issue needs to be established. We argue that a deficiency of civic literacy is a key element of the democratic deficit. Most public involvement approaches emphasize balanced background information for participants to consume. This translates into the idea that different perspectives need to be provided to the public to consider if meaningful deliberation – the thoughtful consideration of an issue through the weighing of evidence – is to take place. This might seem counterintuitive, as there then is a requirement to provide information in order to get information (or input). Another way of considering this is that the public involvement host needs to share what it knows, or at least to indicate from where it is starting. In the exploration phase of decision-making, the host might not have much to share. In an evaluation of alternative phases, there should be a base of information on the rationale behind each alternative. This should be provided to the public where at all possible.

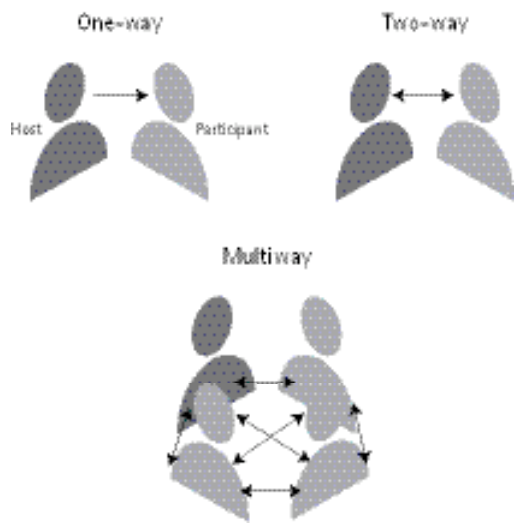
Stakeholder organizations and subject matter experts have critical roles in our definition of the public. Their need for information is different than a citizen's, but not much. Background information from the host can clarify the issue's starting point or present the host's perspective. This can help to provide a focus for the public involvement as well as the parameters around the decision to be made. Just assuming that the organized or expert publics know this intuitively does not set up the public involvement initiative for success.

In most public involvement tools and techniques, the notion of deliberation is often construed as a group activity – many equate deliberation with group interaction. We support the argument that the act of deliberating can also be an individual one. Goodin argues that deliberation does not need to be limited to the "external collective" (2003). It is possible for individuals, through an "internal reflective" approach, to engage in internal deliberation and experience informed consideration of an issue. As the jury collectively deliberates the facts presented before it, so does the judge in the privacy of his or her chambers.

Public involvement and interactions

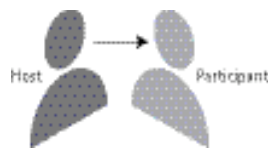
At the foundation of public involvement are the different types of interactions and the flow of information between the host and participants. These can range from the simple to the significantly complex. We argue that, as shown in figure 6, public involvement initiatives encompass one-way, two-way or multiway interactions between the host (black in figures 6 through 10) and participants, whether citizens or stakeholders (grey in figures 6 through 10). Some initiatives might incorporate all three types of interactions, while others might consist of one or two. In this section, we discuss these interactions and provide examples of e-consultation tools that fit the different types.

Figure 6
Interactions



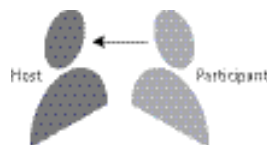
The one-way broadcast (figure 7) is the simplest form of public involvement, and it is difficult to consider it on its own to be a valid or effective form of involvement. It represents traditional communications that might include the release of a report, a newsletter, a press release or a media event. The primary role of the one-way broadcast is the dissemination of information. With the increasing noise in communications, this type of involvement on its own makes it quite difficult to achieve a significant positive impact. We argue, though, that the one-way broadcast is an essential precursor to more sophisticated involvement activities. Communications are essential to raising awareness of a public involvement opportunity among the intended participants. We have found in our work that this is a critical area, in which many public involvement hosts do not invest enough time or resources.

Figure 7
One-Way Broadcast



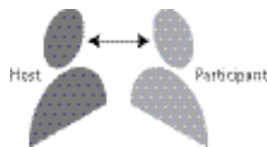
The opposite of the one-way broadcast is the one-way receipt (figure 8). This would come in the form of unsolicited input – for example, a letter to a minister or member of Parliament. Democratic institutions frequently receive unsolicited input. In certain cases, this type of input is seen as a “trigger” to initiate a public involvement initiative.

Figure 8
One-Way Receipt



From a practical standpoint, two-way interaction (figure 9) is the beginning of active involvement and consultation. The interaction primarily exists in a one-to-one interaction at this level between the host and participants. The host might initiate interactions with a request for input from many participants, but formal interaction among the participants is not part of the intended design. Most of the e-consultations we have participated in had this type of interaction as their starting point.

Figure 9
Two-Way Interaction



Two-way interaction tools: the workbook

The workbook is a personally deliberative two-way interaction tool that provides information for a participant to consider before presenting questions. The workbook can be effective in providing baseline information and establishing civic literacy around an issue with participants. The output is primarily quantitative data, although qualitative data can be also collected. The challenge in

drafting a workbook is making the conscious effort needed to ensure that the information is balanced and unbiased. In our experience, this can be overcome with a diverse external review panel, not unlike an academic peer review.

Designing a workbook to present a participant with the same tough choices decision-makers face can result in several outcomes. For example, a sense of empathy can be established by creating an understanding of the potential trade-offs in making choices. Finite resources also become a reality when priorities need to be determined. The point is that creating an initiative with tough choices can be a rewarding and engaging initiative from a participant's perspective.⁵

Workbooks do not resonate with all types of participants; some will reject a highly structured process with a quantitative foundation. While workbooks facilitate large-scale participation, they often need to be complemented with a qualitative input opportunity.

Two-way interaction tools: stories and ideas

Story- and idea-sharing tools are on-line qualitative input processes, structured to allow for thorough qualitative analysis. Stories and ideas each have a different intent and focus: a story has an experiential and anecdotal emphasis, while an idea is more action- or solution-oriented. To provide some structure to the input, a choice of themes, topics, issues or challenges can be established so that a participant contributes to a host's areas of interest.

In our experience, participants value the opportunity to share their stories and ideas with other participants in their preferred fashion. We do not know whether the underlying motivation is the sense of community that is established, the learning from others, Internet voyeurism or the wish of some to see their contribution in black and white on a Web site. Ultimately, the ability to share becomes the prerogative of both the host's design and the participant's interest in doing so.⁶ Story and idea sharing are an effective qualitative complement to the quantitative orientation of a workbook or "choice book." We have found that with citizen-focused initiatives, there is an emphasis on stories; conversely, stakeholders and experts concentrate more on presenting ideas, suggestions for solutions or actions.

Other two-way interaction tools

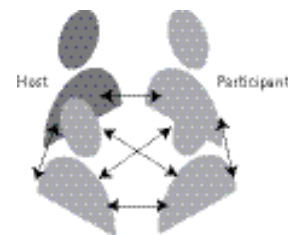
Other two-way interaction tools are also used in e-consultation. One example, though not often used, is on-

line surveys or polls. While they serve a purpose and can be an excellent data-gathering tool, surveys do little to increase civic literacy, enable a public discourse or create the opportunity for deliberation. It should be noted, however, that we do use them for evaluation purposes at the conclusion of an e-consultation.

Another two-way interaction tool that we do not often use in e-consultation, at least for data collection purposes, is the blog – a word derived from "Web log" and a concept not dissimilar to that of a diary: the author posts a message with limitless flexibility (hourly, daily, weekly, occasionally). Most blogs allow their readers to comment on the post. In this sense, a blog might be seen as a two-way or multi-way interaction tool, depending on how the comments system is structured. We like blogs, but we see them more as a communications vehicle than as a means of collecting input to contribute to robust decision-making.

Multiway interaction (figure 10) involves a different level of sophistication and complexity. In this model, the public involvement host can initiate interactions with a number of participants. The intent is for the interactions to be not just between the host and individual participants, but among participants as well. Moving from a one-to-one model to a many-to-many form of involvement can result in the host's losing a degree of control. The host might set boundaries or guidelines for the many-to-many interactions, but the interactions among participants ultimately cannot be accurately predicted or contained. This is a desirable outcome in many situations.

Figure 10
Multiway Interaction



Multiway interaction tool: on-line dialogue

On-line dialogue aims to engage participants in a manner similar to in-person dialogue. It is the idea of exploration, sharing and learning among participants that is a fundamental objective of most initiatives. While deliberative dialogue is a best practice, whether on-line or in traditional forms, not all on-line dialogue is deliberative.

On-line dialogue can be delivered through various designs and permutations. From a technology standpoint, most government undertakings use a lowest or lower common denominator approach. Video-based dialogue is a reality for some potential participants, but a more general adoption of this technology is challenged by broadband access issues, hardware and software standards. Text-based dialogue, for the most part, is how on-line dialogue operates in a government context.

On-line dialogue can be moderated or unmoderated. We have had more success with moderated events, but with highly motivated participants moderation is not essential. Moderators can provide summaries, keep the conversation going and invite participants to “speak up” or come back to the virtual table. On-line dialogue can also be set up to take place in real time (synchronous) or any time (asynchronous). There are benefits and drawbacks to scheduling, convenience and the time commitment to both approaches, but these are design factors for the host to consider.⁷

There is often some discussion about the size of the group for an on-line dialogue. From a technological standpoint, there is little difference whether the group has 20, 200 or 2,000 participants. In attempting to adapt the best practices from in-person dialogue to the on-line experience, we have found that 15 to 20 participants around a virtual table have the benefits of small group dialogue – large enough to keep the conversation going, but small enough that everyone can have the opportunity to make a contribution and that information overload is avoided.

In our experience, multiway interaction tools are still in a state of refinement. We have had both excellent and mediocre experiences with on-line dialogue. More research and experimentation are needed before online dialogue is as useful as two-way interaction e-consultation tools.

Other multiway interaction tools

Discussion boards are almost as old as the Internet itself when one takes into account the context of newsgroups, listserves and e-mail. They allow individuals to visit a site and post on an issue, and the sequence of posts of individuals is referred to as the “thread.” Threads can be structured around themes or topics. A visitor to a discussion board can review different topic threads and make a post.

Discussion boards have become more sophisticated recently, with more intuitive interfaces and higher-quality content indexing and searching within threads and posts. Discussion boards are also highly

scalable and can easily accommodate large-scale involvement. For a new participant, the challenge sometimes is figuring out where to start and where the conversation has been. On a site with 10,000 posts or even just 500, a sense of information overload is often unavoidable. A moderated discussion board can provide summaries of contributions, although this is rare in practice. Discussion boards can be a rich source of qualitative information, but the lack of structure makes thorough qualitative analysis difficult.

Another tool that has enjoyed a rapid increase in popularity is the wiki. A simplistic definition of a wiki is a Web page that can be edited easily by multiple authors. A wiki usually has the ability to track changes and keep previous versions, and in its basic form is a tool for collaborative authoring. The use of the wiki in e-consultation initiatives is still quite nascent. Wikis are first and foremost a tool for collaboration – they are best applied where there is a pre-existing relationship or working relationship, which is not always the case with a public involvement initiative. (Tapscott and Williams explore mass collaboration in their 2006 work, *Wikinomics*.)

The best example of where the wiki has worked is Wikipedia. But the broader concept of mass collaboration is the big opportunity for public involvement and e-consultation. Linux or open-source software in general are the great examples of Internet-based mass collaboration. More thinking and experimentation needs to be undertaken to see how these concepts can be applied in a democratic governance and public involvement context.

Who Is Using E-Consultation?

All sectors of Canadian society – private, public, not for profit – are starting to use or experiment with different types of e-consultation and public involvement tools. With whom they are engaging depends on their perspective. Governments consult with citizens, experts, stakeholders and other governments. Businesses look to involve clients, customers and shareholders. Associations in the third sector might look to involve members or clients. All organizations, especially those of a larger scale, have the opportunity to involve employees in both internal and external issues of importance.⁸

Since our experience with e-consultation in the public sector has concentrated on the federal level with

national institutions, the examples we explore below centre on the federal story. There are, however, several good examples at the provincial and municipal levels. Borins and Brown outline Ontario's e-consultations on the 2004 budget and a municipal housing initiative (2007), while Culver and Howe, with a look to efficacy and other outcomes of public involvement, explore an on-line budget deficit consultation undertaken by the City of Moncton (2004).

E-consultation case studies

In this section, having covered the arguments for e-consultation, as well as some theoretical and conceptual considerations, we now introduce some practical applications of e-consultation through a series of four case studies in which we were involved as practitioners.⁹ The first case is from a parliamentary perspective: an e-consultation on mental health embarked upon by the Senate of Canada. The second case is from the public administration perspective: an integrated engagement undertaken by Social Development Canada. The third case is an exploration from the not-for-profit sector: the Canadian Medical Association's (CMA's) e-consultation with its membership on specialty care.¹⁰ The final example comes from outside the Canadian context, but provides a model to which to aspire: an e-consultation initiative undertaken by the Government of New Zealand on prebirth testing.

All four case studies have a number of points in common. In each instance

- a call was placed to a constituency (citizens, members) to provide their input on a matter that was of direct interest to them;
- the e-consultation host was attempting to reach its constituency in this way for the first time;
- communications from the host – for example, the e-mail invitation sent to potential participants, the introductory message of the workbook or choice book – clearly articulated the nature of the input sought and how it would be used to inform policy, with a “promise” to participants that their input would be given due consideration, although it was made clear that the e-consultation results would not be “binding” and that a number of other sources of data would be considered;
- participation was self-selected and entirely voluntary (although the CMA did offer some incentive prizes, these were likely not significant enough to generate the volume of participation that was achieved); and
- participants, in their responses to a standard evaluation form at the end of each workbook or choice

book, indicated that they had enjoyed participating in the e-consultation, had learned something new about the issue, had found it easy (from a technology perspective) and would consider participating in a similar e-consultation in the future.

It thus can be argued that the main drivers of participation were the participants' desire to speak out on an issue that directly affected them and the belief that they would be heard.

A parliamentary case study

In 2005, the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, under the leadership of Senator Michael Kirby, undertook a research initiative on the state of mental health, mental illness and addiction in Canada (summarized in box 1). This Senate initiative was built on the foundations of work undertaken in the House of Commons by the Subcommittee on Persons with Disabilities, which launched the first Canadian parliamentary e-consultation in December 2002 (Parliament of Canada 2003). The Senate initiative benefited from the process, technical, analytical, procedural and governance lessons learned by the House.

Senate committees – or parliamentary committees, for that matter – do not often hear testimony from a broad base of individual citizens. Members of the committee identified a need to move beyond the “usual suspects” and speak to “consumers” of mental health and addiction services in Canada. Beyond transparency and inclusivity, the intent was to test several ideas and courses of action, including a consumer charter of rights. Additionally, it was felt that family members of consumers and those working in the health care system also had valued experiential perspectives that would further inform the committee's research.

Strategic considerations

During a previous preliminary research phase, a short on-line survey had garnered interest in the mental health community. The committee chair and research team believed that this provided a foundation upon which to launch a more comprehensive initiative. There was anecdotal evidence that participants were particularly sensitive to providing information about their mental illness and addiction experiences. To address this issue, two specific courses of action were implemented. First, the ability to make an anonymous contribution had to be provided. Second, while participants were on the consultation site, the session had to be encrypted to ensure that contributions submitted were private and secure.

Box 1 Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addiction in Canada

Organization	Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology
Project time period	January to July 2005
Public involvement period	April to June 2005
Decision-making phase	Evaluate alternatives
Public	Consumers (persons living with mental illness or addiction), their families and caregivers; and service providers (health professionals working in the mental health and addiction system)
Public contributions	Explore, validate and reconcile ideas
E-consultation interaction	Two-way e-consultation
E-consultation tools	Workbook and idea sharing
Participation scale	1,255 contributions, consisting of 795 workbooks and 460 idea submissions
Complementary activities	Cross-country committee hearings

Approach

The primary target audiences for the e-consultation were consumers (persons living with mental illness or addiction), their families and caregivers, and service providers (health professionals working in the Canadian mental health and addiction system). However, participation was open to all those interested in completing a workbook or sharing an idea or experience.

The workbook began by soliciting participants' views on the current state of the Canadian mental health and addiction system. Participants were then invited to assess a series of scenarios that illustrated options for improving the Canadian mental health and addiction system, and to identify what they felt should be the priorities for action. They were also asked to comment on specific ideas under consideration by the committee, one of which was the creation of a charter of consumers' rights. Participants were also given the opportunity to submit their personal recommendations on how to address some of the challenges currently faced by the Canadian mental health and addiction system through an open-ended (qualitative) idea-sharing process that complemented the close-ended (quantitative) questions of the workbook. Here, input was solicited under four main themes: access to services, services and supports, the role of the federal government, and, "If you could change one thing, what would it be?" A plain-language review of all consultation materials, as well as an external review by subject matter experts, was

instituted to ensure that the content was accessible, balanced, relevant and accurate.

A unique partnership was established with Les Impatients, a Montreal-based organization that uses art as a form of therapy for those living with mental illness. The artwork was converted to a digital format and used throughout the on-line consultation Web site and on-line workbook as a means to make the on-line experience more engaging and reflective of the experience of participants.

Participants in the e-consultation were recruited via an active viral marketing campaign: a number of provincial and national associations with an interest in mental health were sent a letter signed by the committee chair, an invitation to their members to participate in the e-consultation and a promotional poster. Many groups responded by promoting the e-consultation within their networks. In addition, targeted advertising was placed in national mental-health-related publications.

Findings

The outcomes of the e-consultation exceeded the expectations of the committee and its research team. In all, 1,255 contributions were received, including 795 workbooks and 460 idea submissions. Participants included a mix of consumers, family members, service providers and a small group of concerned citizens. Close to half (43 percent) of workbook respondents were service providers, while the other half was made

up primarily of consumers (22 percent) and family members (27 percent). The distribution of idea submissions was the reverse: approximately 40 percent were submitted by consumers, 35 percent by family members and 25 percent by service providers. Many participants “wore multiple hats,” sharing their views and experiences from multiple perspectives.

It is noteworthy that those most directly affected by the issue were most likely to opt for the qualitative process, often stating that they valued this opportunity to voice their concerns and share their thoughts directly with the committee. Reflective of this was the fact that the ratio of workbooks to ideas was almost two to one, much higher than our usual experience of 10 to 15 percent.

The on-line findings strongly supported the notion that issues of availability and accessibility of services, as well as discrimination and stigmatization, remain prevalent. Emphasis was placed on adopting a more holistic approach to mental health. Participants also advocated a broader federal role in establishing standards in mental health.

Challenges and lessons learned

The parliamentary context and calendar can make comprehensive and long-term research challenging. The spectre of an election loomed large at several stages of the project and could be considered to have been disruptive. The consultation input period had just finished when the election was called and Parliament prorogued, resulting in the dissolution of the committee and the cessation of research. Fortunately, several key members of the committee remained when it was reconstituted under a new government and new session of Parliament.

The Library of Parliament, which provides research services to both the House of Commons and the Senate, was able to transfer many of the lessons learned from the House of Commons pilot initiative to this Senate research initiative. The internal library team led the development of the e-consultation content and lines of inquiry, and they were supported by analytical and technology expertise. The dynamics of the team facilitated a comparatively rapid development of the Senate e-consultation compared with the experience of the House of Commons pilot. This is consistent with our finding that the first e-consultation can have a steep internal learning curve. The success of the previous initiative not only had set precedents, but had also removed some of the barriers and resistance that are often associated with new approaches.

Epilogue

These e-consultations contributed to the momentum building for action. The 2007 federal budget announced the creation of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, with Senator Michael Kirby appointed as its first chair, and with a 10-year mandate to address several key issues identified in the e-consultation, including addressing the challenge of stigma, increasing access to knowledge and creating a pan-Canadian strategy for mental health.

From a public efficacy perspective, the mental health community can see its aspirations and recommendations begin to come to fruition. This is a tangible example of meeting public desires without a significant gap between expectations and what is to be delivered. It is a step in the right direction when it comes to reducing the democratic deficit.

The state of parliamentary committee partisanship in the context of minority governments, however, makes objective public involvement difficult. Speaker Peter Milliken’s recent statement in the House serves to validate this conclusion: “Frankly speaking, I do not think it is overly dramatic to say that many of our committees are suffering from a dysfunctional virus that, if allowed to propagate unchecked, risks preventing Members from fulfilling the mandate given them by their constituents” (2008). Indeed, since this initiative was completed, with the exception of an occasional Web survey, little comprehensive e-consultation work has been undertaken in either the Senate or the House.

Recommendations

Initiating deliberative and genuine e-consultation and public involvement in today’s parliamentary context is challenging, if not impossible. But objective research is still being undertaken by the Library of Parliament, which could be commissioned to undertake an engagement on behalf of a committee. Committee members might be profiled in a welcome message or an invitation to participate, but the design and operation of the e-consultation would be led by a research team. This might seem an odd approach at first, but it is similar to the means by which a committee might undertake a public opinion research poll to be delivered by a third party.

A public administration case study

In fall 2004, Social Development Canada (now Human Resources and Social Development Canada), recognizing the need to engage Canadians on priority

Box 2 Integrated Social Development Engagement Strategy

Organization	Human Resources and Social Development Canada (formerly Social Development Canada)
Project time period	October 2004 to December 2005
Public involvement period	Varied for each of the three issues (caregivers, persons with disabilities, seniors)
Decision-making phases	Varied, but primarily gather information, and develop and evaluate alternatives
Public	Citizens
Public contributions	Explore and reconcile ideas
E-consultation interaction	Two-way e-consultation
E-consultation tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workbook • Idea and story sharing
Participation scale	1,564 contributions, consisting of 1167 workbooks and 397 stories submissions.

issues, identified caregiving, child care, seniors, persons with disabilities and communities as particular areas of focus. Because of the overlap in audiences and the horizontal nature of the issues, the department's leadership determined that an integrated approach was needed to provide a coordinated effort in the area of public involvement (for a summary of this case, see box 2). Each issue was at a different stage in the policy development or decision-making life cycle. Caregiving was a new policy idea at the time, with little history or data on which to move forward. At the other end of the spectrum, child care agreements were being negotiated between the federal and provincial/territorial governments, and there was a rich foundation of policy to build upon with seniors and persons with disabilities. The role of communities was being investigated and framed in new and different ways.

Strategic considerations

An integrated engagement team was created with a mandate to deliver a coordinated consultation effort, both in person and on-line, on all five issues, where possible. The team was made up of

directors general from each policy area, communications and the offices of two ministers. The authors provided expertise and advice on the process to complement this team.

There was an urgent need to launch the caregiving consultations, as there were significant gaps in the policy research and the leadership felt that consultations with caregivers, experts and stakeholders could help move the file forward. As a result, the caregiving e-consultation was launched first. The child care issue was in the midst of federal-provincial/territorial negotiations, so that, with the exception of a few ministerial round tables, broad consultations (electronic or otherwise) were deemed inappropriate at the time. The seniors and persons with disabilities files had several potential areas of interest for consultation and were seen as the logical candidates for the second consultation phase. Communities had recently commissioned policy research, so it was decided that consultations on this topic would be undertaken as the third phase, once the issues were more clearly defined. The election and change in government ultimately meant that this issue was not consulted on in a fashion similar to the others.

Approach

This initiative was broader than e-consultation alone, since the intended audiences to be engaged were citizens, stakeholders, experts and parliamentarians, as well as other governments, but the e-consultations were designed to complement and provide a broader perspective than was possible with ministerial roundtables, bilaterals and, in certain cases, negotiations. The e-consultations were made available to all Canadians, and the e-consultations on caregiving, persons with disabilities and seniors included their own workbooks and a story- and idea-sharing process. A single Web site provided participants with the opportunity to learn about or take part in all three e-consultations. Significant efforts were undertaken to ensure technological accessibility for persons with disabilities.

Findings

From the department's perspective, the caregiving initiative was the most successful because of the prioritization data that were collected via the workbook and the rich anecdotal input from the stories and ideas. These tied into a policy report that served as the foundation for a conference that brought together a diversity of stakeholders to set the national caregiving agenda. Since this was a new issue with little data on needs and priorities,

the input received through the e-consultation proved invaluable for the department's policy team, and provided a rich foundation for discussion during the stakeholder conference. The caregiving consultation generated a total of 657 contributions, divided between 497 workbooks and 160 story submissions.

The persons with disabilities consultation findings provided additional policy input, generating a total of 724 contributions, divided between 520 workbooks and 204 story and idea submissions. It is interesting that the qualitative input provided by persons with disabilities exceeded our traditional ratio, with almost one story for every two workbooks. As was the case with the Senate e-consultation, the most vulnerable audiences typically were the most likely to favour the story- and idea-sharing process (versus the workbook).

The seniors initiative had a relatively low level of participation compared with the other two consultations, with outreach and communications efforts garnering only about 200 contributions, a scale too small to facilitate a broad base of input for analysis. It is possible to speculate as to why this initiative did not resonate with the community in the same way, but there are no concrete means to draw conclusions.

Challenges and lessons learned

Coordinating five different policy areas, communications and two ministers' offices was quite complex – these groups do not often work together horizontally or even bilaterally – and it is largely due to the support and commitment of senior leadership that this initiative took shape.

The parliamentary calendar and the precarious nature of a minority government also placed considerable strain on the process. Timelines and priorities often changed. One particular challenge during these e-consultations was the restriction placed on advertising as an outcome of the sponsorship scandal. As a result, it was difficult to spread the word comprehensively about the e-consultations. The only way to recruit participants was to promote the e-consultations on the department's Web site and to enlist the support of intermediary interest groups to spread the word about them. While viral marketing is often the most effective way to promote an e-consultation, the nature of this process makes its outcomes somewhat unpredictable: in some instances, it works very well (the message "sticks" and is actively propagated); in others, it proves less powerful (the message does not resonate with the audience or is crowded out by competing messages). Having access to other means of promotion to supplement viral marketing is therefore invaluable.

The approval process was also quite challenging, since cabinet approval was required for the overall approach. For the on-line consultation, specifically, there were several steps to the internal approval process, followed by a final review by the Privy Council Office.

With this, as with other initiatives, in an organization's first comprehensive e-consultation, there are internal lessons to be learned. The most significant lesson from this initiative was the recognition of the value of public involvement. Social Development Canada made a serious commitment to develop a culture of public involvement, supported by a corresponding investment in capacity and resources. The Public Involvement Secretariat was formed at the conclusion of this initiative to serve as a central resource for policy and program areas.

Epilogue

Since this initiative was undertaken, Social Development Canada and Human Resources Development Canada were merged to create Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC). This was more than a simple reconfiguration – it was the reintegration of two completely different organizational cultures. Social Development Canada had taken steps toward reducing the democratic deficit, not as an explicit departmental objective but, rather, as an outcome of interacting with the public. By establishing a new civic discourse, the department was able to create some civic literacy concerning its priority issues. Since the formation of HRSDC, however, several major backward steps have been taken: the public is more stakeholder focused, and more open and inclusive public involvement is now the exception. From an e-consultation perspective, there is a renewed emphasis on simple electronic surveys.

Recommendations

HRSDC still has the institutional knowledge and capacity to return to more democratic public involvement and e-consultation. Leadership is needed to build on Social Development Canada's foundations. Through the establishment of guidelines or a public involvement framework, it might be possible to reintegrate standards, consistency and best practices. The question remains, though, whether time has run out on the opportunity to build on its predecessor's experiments and explorations.

A case study from the health care sector

In 2001, the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) undertook a review of specialty care in Canada and outlined its key findings in a discussion paper (2001). Five years later, and even though all levels of government had reinvested in the health care system since that time, the CMA still believed there was cause for concern. For example, wait times for specialty care services remained a critical issue, and access to primary care physicians was still problematic in many parts of the country. Referring back to our expanded decision model, the CMA wanted to update its definition of the problem and gather information that would allow it to develop sound alternatives that would be rooted in the realities of physicians on the front line of health care.

Strategic considerations

Beyond the need to review and update the data collected for the 2001 specialty care review project, the CMA was grappling with a broader internal challenge. A recently completed audit of its member communications activities indicated that awareness of the CMA's efforts as an advocate for the profession, for patients and for improved health care remained relatively low among its members, even though members had a strong desire for the CMA to play this role at the national level. The audit also revealed that grassroots members wanted to be more engaged in the development of the organization's policies and positions. In other words, the CMA was grappling with the very issue EKOS Research had described: the gap between how much people *want* to be involved and how much they feel that they are *actually* involved in decision-making and governance (Ekos 2006).

Approach

Given this combined need for relevant data and meaningful member engagement, the CMA chose to engage its individual members (grassroots physicians) in an e-consultation to identify issues of concern and potential solutions in the specialty care system (a summary of the results is shown in box 3). A supporting communications strategy was launched to raise awareness that the CMA was proactively engaging its members in this way; on-line and paper-based advertising, media relations and a direct e-mail campaign to members all served to communicate the message that the CMA was listening and was prepared to act on the input it received from its members.

Box 3 CMA On-line Specialty Care Consultation

Organization	Canadian Medical Association
Project time period	June 2006 to August 2007
Public involvement period	September 2006 and was closed on November 2006
Decision-making phases	Define the problem and gather information
Public	All Canadian physicians
Public contributions	Explore ideas
E-consultation interaction	Two-way e-consultation interaction
E-consultation tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Workbook• Idea and story sharing• Participant reports
Participation scale	4,127 contributions consisting of 3,884 choice books and 243 story and idea submissions. A participant report was sent to each of the 3,884 workbook respondents.
Complementary activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communications strategy• Stakeholder engagement

While the CMA had determined that the on-line consultation would be on the subject of specialty care in Canada, it was important to engage its institutional stakeholders (provincial/territorial medical associations and affiliate specialty societies) in refining the dimensions of the issue and in understanding the different perspectives on this very complex topic. The CMA's objective was twofold: to create an opportunity for building relationships with its strategic stakeholders; and to ensure that the topics explored in the consultation were both relevant and grounded in the experience of physicians, residents and students.

A number of initiatives were implemented in support of these objectives: the creation of the Specialty Care Review Working Group, an advisory committee consisting of representatives of various provincial associations and affiliated specialty societies; the creation of a specialty care CEO task force, which provided communications and recruitment assistance; and the conducting of key informant interviews with representatives of various stakeholder groups. This enabled the collection of detailed input, which, in turn, informed the development of the consultation choice book that formed the core of the e-consultation process.

More than 38,000 CMA members were preregistered for participation in the e-consultation, and each received a personalized invitation e-mail that included “click-through” access to the e-consultation Web site, along with succinct information on the purpose of the e-consultation and how to participate. Prizes were also offered as an incentive for participation. Paper versions of the consultation materials were also made available to those who could not, or preferred not to, participate on-line. In addition to completing the choice book, participants in the e-consultation were invited to share their thoughts and personal experiences of the specialty care system. They could recount their story or that of someone they knew, or share their ideas for addressing a specific issue. The CMA was very clear in presenting the purpose of the e-consultation: to gain a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the specialty care system, as experienced by those on the front lines.

Findings

The CMA specialty care consultation ran for nine weeks and generated a total of 4,127 contributions: 3,884 choice books and 243 story and idea submissions. The on-line consultation tools enabled a two-way exchange between the CMA and its members, with a focus on the exploration of ideas and perspectives. Beyond simply asking questions, the CMA shared relevant facts, context-setting information and scenarios for consideration; it also candidly discussed the benefits and drawbacks of various options. Participants not only answered questions, they were also invited to share their thoughts and ideas to contribute to the CMA’s broader reflection on the issues.

Physicians invested up to one hour of their time to complete the consultation choice book, which achieved a 75 percent completion rate – a noteworthy rate given that physicians are an extremely busy and highly solicited group of professionals. Participants provided valuable input on the situation today but, most important, they also identified a number of priorities for action in the area of specialty care and in the health care system in general. (In addition to quantitative data generated by the on-line workbook, some 265,000 words of qualitative input were received, reviewed and analyzed.)

Findings from the on-line consultation were reviewed by the Committee of National Medical Organizations, Canada’s broadest forum of physician leaders, and by the Specialty Care review Working Group. This ultimately led to the formulation of 16

recommendations, which were adopted by the CMA board and which fed directly into the organization’s advocacy and policy agenda. The 16 recommendations were accompanied by a participants’ report, sent to each of the 3,884 workbook (choice book) respondents, telling them what conclusions had been drawn and what actions would be taken as a result of the input received through the e-consultation.

Challenges and lessons learned

One of the main challenges of this type of initiative is communications and outreach. Close to 4,000 physicians participated in this e-consultation, but the CMA represents approximately 65,000 doctors, residents and medical students across Canada. To some, a participation rate of 6 percent is satisfactory, but the challenge of making more voices heard remains, particularly in the case of self-selected samples, as it was in this context.

Physicians are busy and oversolicited. Cutting through the “noise” to get and then maintain their attention for close to an hour can be a significant challenge. It was therefore critical that both the communications surrounding the consultation process and the consultation content itself be relevant, meaningful and to the point.

This e-consultation illustrated that a process that is seen to be legitimate and credible has the greatest chances of success. The relevance of the issue for the target audience and the fact that, despite certain misgivings, participants trusted that their voices would be heard and that their contribution would make a difference in the decision-making process (a comment often heard in participants’ stories) were critical in this regard. This perception was reinforced by the distribution of the participants’ report.

The e-consultation was also designed with the needs of the audience in mind: a simple and user-friendly security model (preregistration) removed psychological barriers to participation, and the e-mail recruitment campaign allowed participants simply to “click to participate.” The consultation materials were designed to take full advantage of physicians’ experience and knowledge, and provided them substantive and balanced information for consideration. The “anytime, anywhere” nature of on-line participation provided a high degree of flexibility and convenience that made it easy for physicians to fit the e-consultation into their schedules.

Finally, the structured data collection process facilitated the analysis of the large volume of data

collected. This proved to be invaluable, given that participation rates quadrupled the original target of 1,000 and that the volume of qualitative data collected was tenfold what had been expected.

Epilogue

The specialty care consultation was the first and largest e-consultation conducted by the CMA, and it marked a turning point in how the CMA engages its members. This success opened the doors for similar on-line initiatives, allowing the CMA gradually to build a critical mass of “cyber-engaged” members. However, input collected on-line has also served as fodder for continued discussion in other fora – for example, in a series of in-person dialogues between the CMA president and grassroots members during a pan-Canadian outreach initiative. The net result is that the CMA has renewed its commitment to consult, to be responsive, to be representative and to build a stronger, more personal relationship with its members.

A model case study from New Zealand

In New Zealand, Toi te Taiao: the Bioethics Council was established after the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Genetic Modification to consider the cultural, ethi-

cal and spiritual issues raised by biotechnology (see box 4). In this role, the council provides information, promotes and participates in public dialogue and gives advice to the government. The council was scheduled to report to the government in May 2008 on the issue of prebirth testing, and sought to engage New Zealanders in an inclusive public dialogue on this issue.

Strategic considerations

Given its mandate to promote and participate in public dialogue, and given that prebirth testing touches the lives of so many people, the council needed to demonstrate leadership and the political will to engage citizens in open and frank dialogue on the issues. This vision reflects what Axworthy posits as a potential solution to the democratic deficit: changing the role of political parties (or, in this case, a government agency) to have increased responsibility for public discourse (2004).

The council therefore opted for a transparent, public and participatory process for framing the issue and developing its recommendations. More specifically, the council emulated the approach used by the US-based National Issues Forum Institute, which promotes the use of “issue books” as a framework for public deliberation. In choosing such an approach, the council aimed to make its pub-

**Box 4
Who Gets Born? Prebirth Testing**

Organization	Toi te Taiao: the Bioethics Council (New Zealand)
Project time period	July 2007 to May 2008
Public involvement period	November 2007 to February 2008
Decision-making phase	Evaluate alternatives
Public	Citizens
Public contributions	Validate and reconcile ideas
E-consultation interaction	Two-way and multiway e-consultation
E-consultation tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workbook (choice book) • Idea and story sharing • On-line dialogues • Personalized participant reports
Participation scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A total of 470 contributions were received, including 406 choice books and 64 stories and ideas. • Three on-line deliberation groups brought together a total of 58 participants. • A total of 110 personalized participant reports were distributed to workbook respondents.
Complementary activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person issue-framing workshops • Parallel, in-person, deliberative dialogues • Communications strategy

lic engagement processes more deliberative and focused. The goal was to ensure that the informed views and values of New Zealanders were reflected in the recommendations that the council would make to the government, while also ensuring that the recommendations were just, reasonable and practical.

Approach

The council's approach was based on "multiway" interactions. First, members of the public helped develop the deliberation framework by participating in a public issue-framing exercise. Some 56 citizens contributed to identifying the issues and approaches that were subsequently outlined in a choice book that formed the centrepiece of the various consultation activities undertaken by the council.

A series of 18 in-person public deliberative dialogue events was then organized to gather input from New Zealanders on the approaches under consideration; four of them were Maori-specific events. During these three-hour sessions, participants were called upon to review and discuss the four approaches outlined in the choice book. In order to expand the reach of this public dialogue, the council also launched a parallel on-line deliberation process that mirrored the content and structure of the in-person deliberative dialogues.

The focus, both in-person and on-line, was on evaluating (and augmenting) the alternatives that had been developed during the participatory issue-framing process. In this regard, citizens were being called upon both to validate ideas (comparing them with the reality on the ground) and to reconcile ideas (weighing values, making trade-offs and prioritizing).

The on-line deliberation process consisted of an on-line adaptation of the in-person choicebook, a story and idea submission process and three on-line deliberation groups (actively moderated by council staff). Completing the on-line choice book, which took an average of 30 to 40 minutes, was a prerequisite for participation in the on-line dialogues. A paper version of the choice book was also available for those who could not or preferred not to participate on-line.¹¹ While the consultation materials were not completely bilingual, care was taken to include Maori greetings and proverbs throughout the on-line choice book and Web site to be inclusive of New Zealand's large Maori population. In addition, one of the four approaches under consideration focused specifically on the needs of the Maori.

Great care was also taken to protect the privacy of participants and to ensure the confidentiality of

their personal information. For example, given the personal and sensitive nature of the issue, participants could choose to complete the choice book or share their story or idea anonymously. Participants were asked to choose whether they wanted their story or idea submission to be published in the "shared area" of the Web site or kept private.

Participants in the on-line deliberations could elect to participate under their real name or under the pseudonym of their choice.

Finally, the council undertook a number of initiatives aimed at raising awareness of its on-line deliberation and driving traffic to the on-line deliberation Web site. An e-mail campaign was undertaken to invite people who had already registered their interest in the project to participate, as well as to all those who were registered in the council's general database. In addition, a printed article in a national magazine was in wide circulation during the e-consultation period. Finally, two ads were posted on New Zealand's popular TradeMe Web site.

Findings

The on-line deliberation Web site was launched on November 2, 2007, and closed on February 13, 2008. Participants contributed a total of 406 choice books and 64 stories and ideas. In addition, 58 individuals actively participated in one of the three on-line dialogue groups, which ran for three weeks each and generated more than 130,000 words of comments. Interest in the on-line dialogues was such that, within two weeks of launching the e-consultation, registration to participate in the on-line dialogues had to be terminated because the three planned sessions were already at capacity. It should also be noted that, while the topic of the e-consultation technically affected all citizens, those who were most inclined to participate generally had a very personal interest in or experience of prebirth testing: respondents were predominantly female and of child-bearing or child-rearing age. Most (or their spouses/partners) had experienced a pregnancy and had or planned to have children. A fairly high proportion also had some knowledge and/or experience of prebirth testing. As a result, while response rates for the choice book and story and idea submissions appear relatively low, they nonetheless exceeded expectations.

While the quantitative input collected through the on-line choice book provided a useful baseline of information, the qualitative input received via the stories, ideas and on-line dialogues powerfully put "a

human face” on the issues. The depth and quality of participants’ comments and ideas also reflected the effort they had made to acquaint themselves with the issues and approaches when completing the on-line choice book. In particular, the council noted that in many cases, participants in the on-line dialogues had been able to explore issues in more depth than had been possible in the three-hour in-person deliberative dialogues. This was due in large part to the asynchronous nature of the on-line dialogues, which allowed participants to engage in a “read-reflect-respond” pattern. In other words, engaging in text-based deliberation allowed participants to integrate what was being said in the forum *at their own pace*, to reflect upon it further, to research the issues and to take the time to craft their responses carefully.

In a June 2008 report, the council presented its recommendations to the government, covering the following key areas: the challenges of decision-making about prebirth testing; the need for equitable access to testing for all New Zealanders; the need for high-quality, appropriate and diverse information about prebirth testing for parents and the wider community; the need for people with disabling conditions (including those detected through prebirth testing) and their families to be supported; and the need for an administrative and legislative framework that can respond to new and challenging developments in medical technology in ways that balance individual freedoms with wider cultural, ethical, spiritual and social concerns.

Personalized participant reports were also prepared and distributed to those who had asked to receive one when they completed the choice book (seeking active permission to send a personalized participant report during the data-collection phase is a practice often instituted to protect the privacy of participants’ personal information and to limit unexpected or unwanted follow-up communications). These customized reports summarized recipients’ individual responses to specific choice book questions and contrasted them with those of all participants. The personalized report also included an overview of the council’s conclusions and recommendations, along with customized messages responding directly to the recipients’ positions as reflected by their answers to specific questions.

Challenges and lessons learned

While Internet penetration and technology literacy rates in New Zealand are relatively high, broadband penetration rates remain very low. As such, an exclusive reliance on on-line processes was a significant bar-

rier to participation. Reaching out to and engaging the Maori community on-line was also a challenge; as with Canada’s Aboriginal peoples, the Internet is not the preferred means of communication and engagement for the Maori. Despite the council’s efforts, only a small proportion of participants self-identified as Maori. Finally, the potential bias of self-selected samples was relatively evident. While most respondents clearly were not representative of the New Zealand population at large, one could argue that they were quite representative of those who were most directly affected by the issue of prebirth testing. From the council’s perspective, this made their input both valid and invaluable.

Prebirth testing is a complex issue, fraught with an explosive mix of science, values and emotions. To present the issue in a way that was accessible to the average citizen – and yet without oversimplifying or polarizing it – was a challenge, but necessary. Considerable time and effort therefore was invested in writing the issue book and on-line choice book, with great care taken to ensure the use of accessible language and the provision of balanced information and perspectives. The inclusion of multiple perspectives also made the consultation materials more inclusive – ensuring that everyone could see a little bit of themselves in at least one of the approaches under consideration.

Given that on-line participants could contribute in various ways at different times – for example, by first completing the on-line choice book, then joining an on-line deliberation at a later set date – it was critical to map out the participation options and timelines clearly. To this end, a simple step-by-step process was laid out for participants at the on-line consultation Web site.

Since the council was also attempting to build its internal capacity for public dialogue, a variety of evaluation components was integrated into the on-line consultation to obtain concrete feedback on what worked well and what could be improved the next time. These included an evaluation questionnaire at the end of the on-line choice book, a call for stories about “what taking part in this on-line deliberation has meant to me” and an evaluation questionnaire for participants in the on-line deliberation. The council was also committed to providing “tangible results of participation” through the personalized participant reports.

However, what made this initiative stand out was the degree of commitment and political will demonstrated by the council, and its willingness to push the envelope to “go where the people are.” From the attention-grabbing project title (“Who Gets Born? Prebirth Testing”), to provocative on-line advertising on one of New Zealand’s most popular

Web sites, to experimenting with on-line dialogue, the council was willing to do things differently, and it reaped the benefits from doing so.

Epilogue

The Bioethics Council plays an advisory role in relation to the New Zealand government and, as such, does not have binding authority. As it embarked on this journey, however, the council actively – and successfully – sought assurance from the government that it would provide a formal response to the council's report and recommendations. Following the launch of the final report, on June 18, 2008, the Honourable Nanaia Mahuta, Minister for the Environment (and the minister responsible for the council), stated in a media release:

It is often difficult for people to move beyond their personal views and beliefs. As a result, dialogue may end up polarised and adversarial. Many New Zealanders gave up their time to engage with others on the issue of pre-birth testing. I'd like to publicly acknowledge those of you in this room and beyond who took part...The [council's] report shows that there are ways to work through these sorts of issues constructively, ways which offer policy and decision makers a much richer understanding of where people are on these difficult issues, and of what people would be prepared to do, or not. This allows the public to make a genuine contribution to more robust and sustainable decision making. I certainly applaud the work of the Council and intend to initiate a process whereby report findings can contribute to policy work in this area, and better inform the Government's decision making process. To that end, I look forward to the ad-hoc ministerial group meeting to consider the report findings and the framing of a Government response. (Mahuta 2008)

This was a first for the council, but the prebirth testing project has already been cited in New Zealand government circles as a best practice in public involvement and an example from which to learn. By designing the in-person dialogues and moderating the on-line dialogues themselves, council staff built significant in-house capacity and expertise that they can apply to subsequent initiatives.¹²

This project was awarded Special Recognition for Project of the Year at the 2008 International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2) Core Values Awards.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

These case studies represent a small sample of our experiences to date with public involvement and e-consultation. The question remains: Can e-consultation serve as a means of addressing the democratic deficit? On its own, the answer is no. However, we believe that e-consultation and public involvement can contribute to a new form of democratic governance that can take steps toward decreasing the democratic deficit.

The case studies show that e-consultation can address several symptoms of the deficit. The first is in closing the gap between expectations for action and what is actually delivered. E-consultation can help public institutions reach and engage a diversity of perspectives to close that gap. Consider the Senate case study: quite often the Senate does not have the means to engage beyond expert stakeholder perspectives; in this case, however, it was able to complement hearings with diverse citizen perspectives through the e-consultation.

A lack of civic literacy is also a symptom of the democratic deficit. Deliberation and informed participation can present the different perspectives on an issue and allow the public to better explore it. This was seen in all of the case studies with use of the e-consultation workbook to establish a foundation of civic literacy on the issues.

Another symptom of the democratic deficit is the lack of civic discourse and dialogue. While all cases had some degree of discourse, the prebirth-testing case study in New Zealand was the best example. For such a sensitive issue, it was not one where dialogue was avoided, on-line or otherwise. As a result, the attempt to engage the public in dialogue proved helpful in developing a better understanding of the societal values that are essential for robust policy development on this issue.

The case studies point us to a series of policy recommendations for those involved in democratic governance. Meaningful public involvement and e-consultation can go a long way toward reconnecting democratic institutions with the public.

Create a credible and legitimate process

First and foremost, an e-consultation initiative must be seen as credible and legitimate if it is to be successful. To achieve this, there must be a commitment to provide balanced information that allows thought-

ful consideration of the issues. It should be as inclusive and representative as possible, allowing for multiple perspectives to be expressed and respected. Transparency and relevance are also key: an e-consultation process should fit explicitly within a broader context that gives it meaning. In other words, participants must know that they are participating with a purpose. This can be achieved, for example, by linking the e-consultation to key policy or program decisions, as illustrated in several of the case studies.

Provide a rationale for participating

The rationale for participating must be explicit and meaningful: the rationale for organizing the e-consultation, who its hosts are, what “promise” is being made to the participants – all these things must be proactively and transparently communicated throughout the process, from the initial recruitment phases right through the reporting phases. This also presupposes a true commitment to listening on the part of the host. Given the amount of personal drive and commitment it takes to invest one’s time in front of a computer to participate in an on-line exercise, participation cannot and should not appear to be an exercise in futility. The CMA example illustrates the importance of supporting communications activities in this regard and the value of incorporating feedback tools.

Stress sound design

Sound design is critical to the success of any on-line initiative. Indeed, design flaws are magnified exponentially in the on-line environment because participants are interacting with the content *alone*. In most cases, they are not proffered the benefit of seeking guidance from a fellow participant sitting next to them, nor can they raise their hand and ask the facilitator for clarifications. Participants must generate their own energy and momentum, at least initially, given that they cannot feed off the energy of the group. If the process is not intuitive and engaging, participants can easily point their browsers elsewhere. Using accessible language, providing adequate time for participation and taking into account the unique needs of the target audience(s) are all critical. On-line processes must therefore be structured and transparent. It should be explicitly clear to participants what is expected of them and how to proceed. Timelines must be clearly articulated and it must be obvious how the various phases of the process are connected.

Mechanisms that allow participants a role in co-

creating the on-line experience – whether they augment it or openly challenge it – are important, lest they end up feeling confined by the process. This might be as simple as allowing participants to communicate directly with the moderator or including a vehicle (such as a story- and idea-sharing process) with which they can freely share their views on whatever concerns them. The key is to create this opportunity for participants to express their creativity or concerns without allowing them to disrupt the process for other participants.

Finally, it is critical that the e-consultation be analytically feasible and responsible. In other words, e-consultation planning and resourcing should include due consideration of the analytical resources and capacity required to do justice to the input solicited.

Ensure the language is succinct and accessible

Given that the Internet is a medium of the written word, succinctness and accessibility of language are critical. Similarly, tone and style also affect the reader’s receptiveness to the message. This might appear to be stating the obvious, but its importance should not be underestimated: an informal and engaging style might be key to capturing the attention of citizens, but not as well suited to an audience of scientists. Understanding the interests, expectations and capabilities of the audience and adapting accordingly is critical.

Examine quality of form and content

The perceived quality of the on-line experience might be determined as much by content as by form, a factor that is often overlooked. An attractive and professional look and feel, a user-friendly interface, a certain degree of interactivity and an intuitive navigation can enhance a participant’s experience. It might also reduce barriers for those with a less technical inclination.

Emphasize evaluation

Program evaluation theory states that identifying the evaluation indicators and the design of the evaluation process should be an integral part of the design of the overall program. In thinking about e-consultation evaluation, three key questions must be addressed.

First, what are the drivers behind the e-consultation process? For example, a process might be driven by an obligation to consult rather than by a self-motivated desire to do so. Understanding the true drivers or triggers of a process is key if it is to be contextualized appropriately.

Second, what constitutes success? Success might not always be obvious, particularly in the case of public

involvement. For example, a high participation rate might create the illusion of success for the host, but if the quality of the experience is found to be lacking, then was it truly successful? Are the tangible outcomes (say, influencing the policy process) more or less important than the intangible ones (say, educating participants on the issue or mending broken relationships)? The answer to these questions will vary with each initiative.

Third, according to whom is the process a “success”? There is a tendency to evaluate a process from the perspective of either the host or the participants. In fact, a good evaluation should assess the process from the perspective of the participants, the host and, if relevant, significant third parties (such as the media) who might be affected by or who might affect the process. While this is an important principle, we were not able to integrate a multiperspective evaluation in any of the case studies highlighted in this study.

Once there is clarification of the thinking behind these three points, one can then select the relevant evaluation criteria and develop the corresponding evaluation indicators and tools. In other words, one should evaluate both how the public involvement was designed and delivered and what resulted from it.¹³

Codify and formalize

Our final recommendation centres on the codification and formalization of public involvement and e-consultation within the unique context of an organization. In other initiatives, we have examined public involvement and e-consultation frameworks from all levels of government in Canada and internationally. Frameworks make a difference – they provide a touchstone and guidance to those embarking on a public involvement initiative. In the absence of a framework, support and advice will not have the focus that they need to have. Without this guidance, we argue, it is unlikely our other recommendations could be delivered consistently and effectively.

Final Thoughts

There is no doubt in our minds that Canadian society continues to exist in a state of democratic discontent or deficit. Public involvement – specifically, e-consultation – provides a new opportunity to reach out and broadly engage new

perspectives. We have seen that e-consultation tools, with a foundation in informed participation, provide a new means of sharing and learning while accumulating rich input into decision-making.

There are the excuses of time, budget, resources and know-how, but these are increasingly rejected by leaders who see the need and value of a diversity of perspectives. E-consultation does not need to replace traditional face-to-face public involvement; it can serve as a convenient and broad-based complement to an event like a round table or town hall meeting. Organizations will not be able to avoid the fact that future generations will prefer, if not demand, the option to participate on-line. If this reality is not considered, Williams’s quiet discontent and “withdrawal of interest” could worsen beyond our current democratic apathy (1958).

Canada has a base of experience that can serve as a model of e-consultation delivery. There are just as many poor examples, however. This study has documented just four different organizational case studies, and pilots and experiments are now becoming practice areas. The public efficacy and clear results of the impact of citizen contributions are no longer abstract but tangible. There are hurdles and challenges still to overcome, but it is clear that e-consultation and public involvement are key pieces of a new model of democratic governance. E-consultation is not a panacea, but with time, investment and a commitment to meaningful dialogue, it might be possible to see a shift in public perspectives and a renewed belief, trust and interest in our democratic institutions.

Notes

- 1 Joseph Peters is a founding partner and Manon Abud is a partner in Ascentum, a professional services firm that employs a variety of integrated on-line and in-person tools, techniques and technologies that converge to enable informed participation. The case studies presented in this study are e-consultation initiatives that Peters and/or Abud have led.
- 2 According to the principle of subsidiarity, “power should devolve on the lowest, most local level at which decisions can reasonably be made, with the function of the larger unit being to support and assist the local body in carrying out its tasks” (Bellah et al. 1991, cited in Paquet 1999, 192).
- 3 The Government of Canada’s *Common Look and Feel Standards for the Internet* provides a framework to ensure accessibility to information and content. This includes provisions to accommodate factors such as low bandwidth connections or screen readers for persons with disabilities (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2007).
- 4 A variety of approaches can be used to limit manipulation, including registration and account-creation processes tied to a single e-mail address. An anonymous process can also be provided that does not require registration. Both data sets can be kept separate and the results compared; response sets that are exactly the same can also be identified. In any truly open public involvement process, it can be challenging, if not impossible, to eliminate all potential for manipulation without significant costs or hurdles for participants to overcome.
- 5 As practitioners, we have pushed to reframe the workbook as a “choice book” in certain contexts. A choice book more accurately conveys the intent of the tool to engage participants in making policy decisions, trade-offs and choices – but only where there are, in fact, choices to be made.
- 6 In the Senate e-consultation case on mental health, it was decided not to give participants the opportunity to share stories in view of what was felt to be the private nature of the issue.
- 7 Real-time or synchronous dialogue can be difficult to organize logistically on a national basis due to the different time zones, especially if the dialogue is to last several hours. An asynchronous dialogue, however, can be scheduled over several days or weeks, with participants contributing at their convenience. Momentum in the conversation is sometimes challenging to maintain without effective moderation.
- 8 Other examples are also worth mentioning. The Professional Institute of the Public Service, one of the larger federal unions, engaged its members in an e-consultation on values and ethics. IBM explored organizational values so successfully with its “Values Jam” that it was expanded as a business line and later used in a global conversation on habitat, appropriately dubbed “Habitat Jam” (Palmisano, Hemp and Stewart 2004).
- 9 Joseph Peters served as the adviser on public involvement and e-consultation for the Senate and Social Development Canada initiatives. Manon Abud was the public involvement adviser for the Canadian Medical Association and Government of New Zealand initiatives. She was also the lead analyst on the Senate e-consultation.
- 10 The CMA is one of Canada’s largest advocacy organizations, speaking on behalf of approximately 65,000 doctors, residents and medical students across Canada. In many ways, it faces the same challenges as those faced by other democratic institutions: finding ways to engage its constituents more directly and more meaningfully; ensuring that its positions and policies truly reflect the needs and expectations of those it serves; achieving accountability and transparency; and so on. In the language of membership-based organizations like the CMA, these are some of the fundamental tenets of good governance. However, referring back to Newton Dunn’s original definition of democratic deficit, “the distance and disconnect between the European Union and the citizens of its member countries” (1988), it could be argued that this also reflects a drive to diminish the democratic deficit – that is, the distance and disconnect between the institution and the individuals or groups it represents.
- 11 Only two participants made use of this paper-based option, a trend we have seen with e-consultations of late: the paper option accounts for less than 1 percent in most cases.
- 12 The success of this initiative also demonstrated the power of the Internet as a collaboration tool: Manon Abud led this project without ever setting foot in New Zealand.
- 13 See Frewer et al. (2001); Coleman and Götze (2002); and Abelson and Gauvin (2006) – although, in general, these suggest a twin focus on process and outcome. In this light, Abelson and Gauvin’s “process” criteria can be conceptually mapped to Frewer and colleagues’ “acceptance criteria” (“related to the effective construction and implementation of a procedure”).

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Citizen Engagement through On-line Consultation

Kathleen McNutt

E-Consultation and Democracy

At their most basic, e-consultations are on-line forums in which participants are asked to comment on information in order to provide organizations with feedback on various issues. There is a growing body of research that suggests that e-consultations have the potential to facilitate democratic dialogue and be an effective tool in overcoming citizens' discontent with modern democratic institutions (OECD 2001). The promise of e-consultation tools in relation to enhanced democratic participation lies in their capacity to engage the views and desires of the mass public and to incorporate these concerns into policy development. By lowering physical barriers to participation, e-consultations invite engagement from geographically diverse populations. In addition, through the collection of diverse ideas, government's policy capacity is supplemented and commitments to transparency and accountability are served. While e-consultations might act as democratic levers, they are not democratic levellers, as the digital divide continues to produce inequalities among different age cohorts, social-economic classes and urban and northern populations.

Joseph Peters and Manon Abud supply a comprehensive assessment of the possibilities of expanding civic engagement through this particular on-line instrument. They recognize that e-consultations are part of a larger set of democratic tools, and they supply a coherent explanation of how this particular instrument might be used to renew democratic governance in Canada. They also provide an assessment of the democratic deficit in Canada and the applications of e-consultations to address public mistrust in government. To some extent, I support their analysis, but I wish to expand on the relationship between e-consultations and democracy and, in the process, challenge the idea that e-consulta-

tions can successfully contribute to an increase in public trust without a binding commitment from government to incorporate the feedback received into policy development. Although e-consultation will certainly complement off-line consultation processes, without substantive changes to the process of valuing public input, citizens' perceptions of government responsiveness will remain unchanged.

Tools of Democracy

The purpose of engaging the public in policy debates is to improve democratic governance and expand opportunities for public involvement. Growing distrust in government is a global phenomenon, and while governments around the world are consulting citizens on national policy through the Internet and other electronic means, the culture of democratic discontent remains. The OECD report *Citizens as Partners* considers that "engaging citizens in policy-making is a sound investment in the design and delivery of better public policies and a core element of good governance....[I]t contributes to building public trust in government, raising the quality of democracy and strengthening civic capacity in policy making" (2001, 11). To date in Canada, e-consultations have been used primarily to reinforce representative democracy by enhancing the ability of government and other organizations to ask for citizens' or members' input into decision-making. However, the discussion of democracy that Peters and Abud provide focuses more on the technology of enhanced communication and how that technology can enhance effective involvement and input legitimacy. Instead, I focus on e-consultation's potential as a vehicle of democracy to illustrate that how these tools are used and for what purposes will have serious implications for Canadian democratic renewal.

Public discontent with democratic practices and institutions is a major problem in contemporary Canadian society. Most commentators refer to the widespread public distrust in elected officials and governments as the democratic deficit (Milner 2001; Patten 2001). As Peters and Abud suggest, voter apathy, falling levels of civic literacy, suspicion of political leadership and discontent with traditional modes of engagement are all symptomatic of the democratic deficit. Governments have attempted to respond to concerns about existing democratic rela-

tionships and to address citizens' expectations concerning greater public engagement. For example, the federal government has created the position of minister responsible for democratic reform, introduced the *Accountability Act* and now supplies a large collection of government information on the Web. Governments are also experimenting with a number of on-line measures such as citizen surveys, discussion boards and e-consultations.

E-consultations are on-line forums in which a host seeks input from an interested public. Typically, members of organizations or citizens have an opportunity to provide feedback on various issues and concerns, and e-consultations have been identified as having real potential to improve democratic governance and reduce public distrust in government. The types of public involvement resulting from these different tools include access to government information and direct communication, e-consultations as a tool of government that expands current consultation practices and e-consultations as a tool of democracy that expands citizens' participation.

Peters and Abud argue that e-consultations might be used to engage different publics in the policy-making process, to address falling levels of civic literacy and to facilitate deliberative exploration that allows for the publics to be engaged in a civic discourse and dialogue. The authors define three different types of communication based on one-way, two-way and multilevel interactions. The first type of interaction, the one-way broadcast, involves the dissemination of information. Two-way interactions involve a host organization and participants that actively exchange information. Finally, multilevel interaction is on-line dialogue where participants are actively engaged and provide deliberative input into decision-making processes. In the case of one- or two-way communications, consultations might be used strategically to manage dialogue, as the host provides the information being considered and focuses the participants' discussion on particular aspects of that information. Multiway interactions, however, are less easily controlled, as the host and participants become partners in the process together, actively shaping policy options and alternatives. In this sense, two-way interactions are primarily consultative, while multiway interactions are participatory.

E-Consultations: Enhancing Democracy

The use of information communication technologies (ICTs) as tool of democracy supplies new ways for elected representatives, governments and citizens to communicate. ICTs, however, do not in and of themselves facilitate more or better democracy. Using on-line tools to expand public engagement and foster civic literacy is an emergent trend in the democratic reform whereby public institutions are inviting citizens to shape policy outcomes through citizen engagement. To achieve democratic reform, however, the role of citizens must be more than just advisory. Key shifts in public administration meant to respond to citizens' expectations have resulted in governments attempting to collect more public input and then considering this feedback when making decisions. I would argue, however, that, if citizens' participation is to be meaningful, then elected representatives and governments must be willing to negotiate mutually acceptable policy solutions, with public preferences guiding decisions.

Deliberative democracy best describes how participatory practices might be used to enhance democratic governance while still respecting the principles of representative democracy, parliamentary supremacy and responsible government (Talisce 2004). Deliberative democracy is based on a partnership between citizens and their elected representatives deliberating about policy issues. Citizens actively participate in policy development, while elected representatives select policy options and governments are responsible for implementation. E-consultations that open the process to greater participation and value the feedback collected contribute to democratic governance by strengthening the legitimacy of representative democracy in Canada.

While e-consultations are an important step toward increasing citizens' engagement, the manner in which the consultation process is organized will have different implications for democratic outcomes. E-consultations can provide an opportunity for citizens to become legitimate participants in the policy-making process, but this alone involves no guarantee of impact. Active citizen participation in the design and evaluation of government policies would expand public input, but it would also require government to be responsive to citizens' demands, as opposed to clients' preferences. In contrast, e-consultations do not translate into shared decision-making, as govern-

ments are not obliged to take the advice of those being consulted (OECD 2003). Although e-consultations do complement off-line consultation practices and build trust, they will not enhance the democratic process even if they are based on a two-way interaction model. Deliberative practices ensure that citizens' participation is consequential and compels government decision-making to reflect citizens' input.

Traditional consultations oblige governments to *ask* citizens; multiway interactions and on-line participation oblige governments to *listen*. Peters and Abud illustrate the key conceptual and practical challenge of e-consultation with four case studies. The first is a parliamentary example in which the Canadian Senate used on-line consultations to collect input on mental health policy issues. In the second case, Social Development Canada initiated a program to engage Canadians in different policy issues, providing an example of how administrators might include citizens in priority setting. The third case study is representative of the organizational use of e-consultations, and examines a pilot project undertaken by the Canadian Medical Association to collect information on speciality care from its members. The final case provides an international example of an e-consultation initiative on prebirth testing conducted by the Government of New Zealand. The types of public involvement demonstrated in these four case studies were primarily consultative, with only the New Zealand example experimenting with deliberative practices.

As these case studies illustrate, initiatives for e-consultation vary significantly, as do the approaches used. Multilevel interactions in Canada are rare, with decision-making typically centralized on the host. In addition, the extent to which feedback collected will be incorporated into the design, implementation or evaluation remains uncertain. The pilot projects have produced positive outcomes, including increased participation from citizens and collaboration among participants. However, the three Canadian studies focus on two-way interactions, where information is exchanged without any acknowledgement of the government's responsibility to incorporate the feedback into policy design.

Engagement through E-Consultation

E-consultations give governments a valuable instrument with which to engage citizens on-line. On-line governing instruments support var-

ious forms of on-line participation, including Web sites that provide government information, political blogs, citizen surveys, discussion boards and a number of other tools to engage citizens through electronic means. E-consultations will help reform democratic governance and encourage public involvement if consultations are organized as partnerships using deliberative processes. However, as long as e-consultations are used primarily to facilitate public involvement in a strictly advisory fashion, it is unlikely that such on-line instruments will encourage widespread engagement.

The contribution of e-consultations to democratic governance is influenced by four prerequisite factors: public awareness, issue literacy, willingness to provide feedback and political will. People must be aware of the consultation, and thus hosts of the process must make a concerted effort to invite feedback through various means. A basic knowledge of the policy issue being consulted on is necessary for participants to provide meaningful feedback. If citizens are reluctant to become engaged in on-line consultations or unwilling to provide input, even where public awareness and issue literacy are present, the process will fail. Finally, the political will necessary to demonstrate responsiveness, transparency and accountability will be critical to overcoming public distrust. Establishing a commitment to valuing the feedback and incorporating citizens' voices into policy development would oblige governments to listen to citizens' views and encourage citizens to be active shapers of policy outcomes. E-consultation processes that provide the full transcript of the consultation, summarize the input and respond to citizens' priorities and policy concerns are those that demonstrate responsiveness, transparency and accountability. Alternatively, e-consultation processes that reinforce the bureaucratic monopoly and fail to decentralize decision-making over policy development perpetuate public discontent and apathy.

Improving existing political processes requires the electronic engagement of citizens to respond not only to public distrust in government activity but also to citizens' displeasure with Canadian democratic arrangements. In Canada, citizens voice their concerns through elections and elected representatives. Traditionally, government consults citizens episodically and uses public opinion as input into decision-making processes. The design and management of citizens' engagement through electronic means challenges traditional administrative and political cul-

tures. The political will necessary to enhance democracy and decentralize decision-making processes requires reformed public management tools and a renewal of state-society relationships (Aucoin and Turnbull 2003). Currently e-consultations do not support significant changes to representative democracy, and will not "fix" rising citizen disengagement from political life as we have defined it for decades. Meaningful participation organized around deliberative practices will not resolve the problems associated with public discontent, but it will facilitate greater transparency and legitimacy in decision-making and respond to citizens' concerns.

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Can E-Consultations Meet the Expectations of the Wired World?

Colin McKay

There is little doubt that Canada continues to struggle with a general feeling of democratic discontent, quantified by declining political participation, poor awareness of fundamental social and economic challenges and continuing distrust of political leadership among the general public.

Peters and Abud cite a number of approaches that have been proposed to resolve this problem, largely focusing on increasing the opportunities for interaction among politicians, government institutions and the public. They rightly note that this sort of public involvement is only one component of a much larger move toward revitalizing democratic government.

In this comment, I argue that there is a growing role for the ordinary citizen – whether acting individually or in concert – in framing how specific public policy issues are perceived and interpreted among a politically attuned and engaged online audience. Online technologies are helping to build civic awareness among citizens – there is evidence that a growing number of citizens are expressing their political and policy preferences through such online tools as forums, blogs, wikis, social networking sites, e-consultations and even the comment fields of large-circulation newspapers. Importantly for policy-makers, a small but incredibly dedicated group of online commentators and rapporteurs is influencing the public perception of public policy issues through its activities. In Canada, for example, individuals like Cory Doctorow and Michael Geist have helped drive a very public debate on the weaknesses in Canadian copyright legislation. These well-informed and intellectually energetic individuals have had considerable impact on the policy development process.

The ready availability of online sources of information and analysis (whether civic journalism, traditional journalism, think tank analysis or commentary) has provided Canadians the resources to develop

independent but well-informed viewpoints on public policy issues. The continuing evolution of online community-building tools is giving these Canadians the ability to find and develop relationships with like-minded individuals across the country. Together, they may choose to evolve into an issue-specific community with defined political goals or to join an existing civil society group.

This is an expression of civic engagement unseen before on such scale. Canadians are not waiting for traditional barometers – activist groups, issue lobbies, political parties – to measure their concern and engagement on issues of public policy. Rather, individuals are taking active steps to make their points and have their voices heard.

Peters and Abud recount a number of e-consultation projects that have been launched in Canada and abroad in an attempt to capitalize upon these developments. E-consultation is becoming a preferred tool because it allows governments to demonstrate a capacity for the use of new and popular technologies, to solicit greater participation among identified and experienced communities of interest (academics, professionals and participants in a particular field), to increase targeting within specific geographic, economic or social communities and to reach out to the public in general. These efforts can bring new voices, opinions and policy options to the table. They can also dramatically expand the number of submissions that policy analysts and decision-makers must view – no small task for policy shops used to producing high-quality analysis with a limited number of resources.

The stakeholders normally invited to participate in consultations are often representatives of larger academic, community, research or commercial groups. This interpretation is confirmed by the authors' observation that "stakeholders are organized entities of some size or scale" that most likely have an established relationship with the government agency. Given this previous relationship, analysts can make some assumptions about the historic agenda and priorities these stakeholders bring to the consultative process, even as they draw up the process itself. It is far easier for policy analysts to evaluate the results of a consultation process when it is certain all comments come from participants with an equivalent level of awareness of the issue, expertise in the subject and a sense of civic engagement.

In examining the International Association for Public Participation's five-step model of consultation, Peters and Abud take a positive step forward by inte-

grating the contribution of stakeholders and citizens at several points in the policy development process.

Expanded participation is often accompanied by a greater challenge: ensuring that the process contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the issues under discussion. When Canadians of different experience and education are invited to participate in (or self-subscribe to) an e-consultation exercise, the submissions received likely will vary in analytical sophistication and policy insight. As Peters and Abud note, proponents of expanded consultation must put in place the additional resources needed to reflect upon and possibly react to such submissions.

Despite the efficiencies and opportunities inherent in e-consultation and online technologies, government bodies often feel that their ability to experiment is limited by their organizational capacity to deliver the services, government-wide standards for online accessibility and guidelines that mandate organizational branding and messaging. This situation, however, is changing with the passing of each month. In the English-speaking world, government agencies in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand have launched a variety of online tools that attempt to expand the opportunities for dialogue between citizens and their government. Common among these initiatives is the public call for direct contact with decision-makers in government – whether senior bureaucrats or elected representatives. Citizens active in online communities are eager to experiment with new technologies that bypass traditional control mechanisms and remove constraints to dialogue.

Several years ago, pressure for the UK government to develop online channels for public comment resulted in the creation of a public "e-petitions" site under the auspices of the Prime Minister's Office.¹ This initial step towards e-consultation reflected the strengths and weaknesses Peters and Abud identify: the impact and relative worth of well-thought-out petitions were weakened by parallel proposals invoking Tom Jones and the glories of the national football team. Equally relevant to the reception and use of the e-petition site was the government's lack of commitment to acting on any of the proposals.

UK citizens have seen the opportunities for online consultation expand. In 2008, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills launched its national Innovation Nation strategy, incorporating an online component that allowed for direct and public comment.² The Prime Minister also appointed a minister for e-government, who has taken on a public role as

an advocate for opening up government processes and integrating citizen participation. He has assumed a very public and personal face by soliciting comments and input into government activities through the popular microblogging service Twitter.³ Not only has he responded to comments directed to him as part of this dialogue, but he has also taken (relatively limited) action as a result.⁴

In a more modest effort, the UK home secretary launched a limited-time consultative effort designed to measure and influence attitudes among 16- to 25-year-olds about the impending National Identity Card scheme. The site (since withdrawn) was positioned as an open community where young Britons could discuss the ID card scheme and pose questions to the government. Included were several promotional videos featuring students and others asking questions about the scheme, as well as an introductory video from the Home Secretary herself. Importantly, every aspect of the site was open to public comment by registered users. There was not much doubt that citizens were already aware of and held strong opinions about the ID card scheme: the first public comment appended to the Home Secretary's video was, "Whee! Look at me! I'm spinning!" – an obvious allusion to the political spin evident in her comments. Two weeks after the site's launch, more than 2,000 comments had been posted by more than 1,000 community members.⁵ The comments were incisive, but mostly critical and even derisive. Responding to criticism of the site, a private sector researcher hired to create and monitor it noted that "it is hard to describe a website which hosts so many anti-ID Card comments as Government propaganda."⁶

In citing Coleman and Gøtze's (2002) assertion that, as Peters and Abud put it, "citizens do not want to govern, they want to be heard," the authors are certainly correct. Obviously, the UK government recognizes that some stakeholders or citizens expect to engage with their governments and political leaders on their own terms and in their own media. The government sees this contact as the first step in a fundamental evolution of the political process, where the decision-making process becomes more transparent and open to greater input from concerned citizens,

This recognition is mirrored in the United States, where governments at the federal, state and municipal levels are experimenting with similar tools. In just one federal department – Homeland Security – there have been two distinct approaches to establishing a bidirectional relationship with citizens and stakehold-

ers in the aviation and homeland security sectors. At the very top of the department, a blog has been set up to provide the secretary a platform to discuss his interpretation of recent events and policy decisions.⁷ The Transportation Security Administration has also set up a blog, written and managed by agency staff, to tackle public comment and criticism head-on. Despite nearly crashing on its first day of operation under the weight of incoming traffic and an avalanche of negative citizen comments, this blog has proven resilient and responsive to citizen feedback.⁸ In some ways, these government agencies have been pushed to embrace more relaxed and responsive online tools by individuals who have found their own voices, and influence, through the use of online tools.

As active participants in policy areas and program activities, civil society groups have accumulated the experience and developed the insight to be invited to participate as stakeholders or policy experts in traditional consultative exercises. As largely volunteer organizations with direct links to individuals and community groups, they are almost obligated to build multidirectional communications systems that incorporate and champion the many priorities of their diverse membership bases. Once these groups have developed as a result of online cooperation or action, their expectations can grow beyond simple dialogue, and they may seek political reaction to their needs or demands. For instance, in the United Kingdom, a limited group of civil society groups has worked with a handful of technologically aware members of the UK government to convince the bureaucracy to experiment with new online tools and consultation methods.

On our side of the Atlantic, these groups generally have had less success. One can find an example of the development of an online community deeply involved in public policy issues among the groups debating the reform of copyright legislation in Canada. Long the subject of discussion among creator, producer and consumer stakeholder groups, the anticipated proposals for legislative reform became the subject of detailed discussion, dissection and criticism by individuals whose online commentary served as a rallying point for a larger and more diverse community, including independent artists and performers, smaller music labels and individual Canadians.

In the absence of a government-led and multidirectional consultation program to address concerns about the reform proposals expressed by the public, the community itself prepared detailed online consultation documents to guide its self-directed debate.

These included explanatory videos, narrative documents, issue-by-issue fact sheets and even a comic book⁹ that set out the positions of all the relevant stakeholders, politicians and industry representatives. In effect, the community leveraged the skills and public policy expertise of its individual members to develop an informed e-consultation exercise that generated a considerable amount of public interest in copyright issues. In one notable case, former member of Parliament Sarmite Bulte became the focus of criticism by online critics for her perceived ties to US interests.¹⁰ Some have argued that this criticism was responsible in part for her defeat in the subsequent election.

As Peters and Abud argue, a measured and logical approach to addressing the democratic deficit should include a considered strategy to expand the reach and influence of consultation efforts, particularly in online environments. In examining four particular case studies, they emphasize that e-consultation processes must incorporate sound design, encourage a certain amount of consistency in form and content, and build in some method for evaluating the effort. With these conditions in place, government agencies can collect, assess and incorporate any public comment received into their policy development process. Yet, all the online experiments I have discussed in this comment failed to meet one or all of these conditions, and should not serve as comprehensive models for any e-consultation initiative that intends to inform and guide the development of effective public policy. They should, however, serve to indicate that the level of civic engagement or political activity among online communities should not be understated.

The greatest test of whether online engagement can be translated into political influence and reflected within the policy development process remains to be seen. US president-elect Barack Obama won election with a careful combination of political messaging, inspirational oratory and extensive participation by online communities organized around official and unofficial campaign sites. Obama's political campaign relied upon the dedication of hundreds of thousands of volunteers organized largely through their involvement in a dedicated online social network. This network, developed and supported by Obama's campaign organization, allowed volunteers to take personal initiative in organizing local campaign activities and soliciting support for the candidate while drawing upon political materials prepared by the campaign. As the campaign grew in strength,

individual Americans began to develop their own campaign materials, including near-professional-quality videos. The candidate kept his distance, but the campaign created a personal account for Obama on the microblogging service Twitter.

It remains to be seen what steps President Obama will take to incorporate online tools and greater public involvement in government affairs. His technology policy, issued during the campaign, suggests that his administration will work to make some government data and information sources easily accessible for online adaptation. The Obama administration, however, likely will find it hard to implement radical changes in the policy development process in Washington. Traditional stakeholder groups, including a wide range of think tanks and industry associations, are used to having their voices heard in the White House and on the Hill. The new administration will have to build a careful and considered path that accommodates both the expectations of these existing stakeholder groups and the aspirations of the hundreds of thousands of individual citizens who participated in the Obama campaign.

The fundamental question, as governments consider expanding citizen participation and consultation, is: Are political leaders ready to engage the public in a wide-ranging debate on public policy issues? A truly multi-directional communications framework, like that put in place by the Obama campaign, will encourage members of the public to believe that they have an influence upon the identification and choice of public policy options by government. But one enduring impression remains: it is clear that if they are given political motivation, technological support and encouragement from community leaders, individuals and communities will embrace online tools to engage in the democratic process. The democratic deficit may continue to weigh upon the political process overall, but opportunities for improvement exist if managed properly.

Will this situation be improved by e-consultation frameworks that attempt to incorporate and channel the energy and innovation produced by citizens online, or will public expectations eventually overwhelm these efforts? The answer may lie in the flexibility of the e-consultation frameworks and in the ability of public servants and their political leaders to react quickly and effectively to the online and offline communities that develop around specific public policy issues.

Notes

- 1 See <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/>
- 2 See <http://interactive.dius.gov.uk/innovationnation/>
- 3 See http://twitter.com/tom_watson
- 4 See <http://www.futuregovconsultancy.com/index.php/2008/06/09/busting-bureaucracy-and-procuring-with-purpose/>
- 5 See http://www.ips.gov.uk/identity/downloads/mylifemyid_research.pdf
- 6 See <http://id-watch.co.uk/2008/10/27/a-response-to-ray-poynter/>
- 7 See <http://www.dhs.gov/journal/leadership/2008/09/ike-response.html>
- 8 See http://www.dhs.gov/xnews/releases/pr_1227637223871.shtm; and <http://www.tsa.gov/blog/2008/12/frequent-travelers-experience-on-other.html>
- 9 See http://www.appropriationart.ca/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/51_state.pdf
- 10 See <http://www.robhyndman.com/2006/01/12/contro-versy-over-bulte-comments-at-all-candidates-debate/>

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Plusieurs symptômes sont révélateurs d'un déficit démocratique, par exemple une faible participation électorale, un faible engagement dans les partis politiques et une baisse de confiance à l'égard de la classe politique et des institutions démocratiques. Mais on parle moins de cet autre symptôme qui est celui de l'écart entre les attentes de la population et l'action gouvernementale, dont témoigne l'incapacité des gouvernements de produire les résultats attendus par les citoyens.

Pour remédier au déficit démocratique, on a notamment proposé de réformer le système électoral et d'améliorer les connaissances politiques des jeunes. Mais la plupart des solutions avancées seraient difficiles à mettre en œuvre et ne seraient efficaces qu'à long terme. Tous les observateurs conviendront cependant de l'importance d'accroître la participation du public pour enrichir le discours politique, élargir le dialogue et impliquer la population dans les processus décisionnels de nos institutions démocratiques.

Dans cette étude, Joseph Peters et Manon Abud (Ascentum Inc.) établissent d'abord pourquoi le Canada souffre d'un déficit démocratique, puis ils proposent de l'amoindrir en renforçant la participation du public aux processus démocratiques par voie de consultation électronique. Sans y voir un remède miracle, ils montrent que cette nouvelle approche pourrait aider nos institutions démocratiques canadiennes à prendre de meilleures décisions grâce à l'engagement de la population.

Les auteurs définissent la consultation électronique comme étant l'utilisation des technologies de communication et d'information en vue de stimuler la participation de publics variés à l'aide de différentes formes d'interaction avec les institutions démocratiques. Entre autres avantages, cette approche pourrait favoriser la culture civique et la participation de la population au discours et au débat politiques, tout en traitant certains symptômes clés du déficit démocratique comme l'écart entre les attentes du public et l'action gouvernementale.

Plusieurs études de cas viennent ensuite illustrer l'application de cette approche. La première, menée dans un cadre parlementaire, concerne une consultation en ligne sur la santé mentale effectuée par le Sénat canadien. La deuxième examine une consultation dans le secteur de l'administration publique, entreprise par Développement social Canada, sur des enjeux comme la prestation de soins, la garde d'enfants, les personnes âgées, les personnes handicapées et les collectivités. Issue du secteur tertiaire, la troisième consultation a été réalisée par l'Association médicale canadienne, qui a interrogé ses adhérents sur la question des soins spécialisés. La dernière étude a été menée à l'étranger — il s'agit d'une consultation sur le dépistage néonatal effectuée par le gouvernement de la Nouvelle-Zélande — et se présente comme un exemple à suivre. Les auteurs examinent l'orientation

Résumé

stratégique, l'approche, les conclusions, les difficultés et les leçons à tirer de chacune de ces initiatives.

À la lumière de ces études de cas et de leur expérience de la participation du public et de la consultation électronique, les auteurs formulent plusieurs recommandations à l'intention des acteurs de la gouvernance démocratique qui envisageraient d'effectuer des consultations électroniques. Parmi ces recommandations, on trouve :

- La mise au point d'un processus de consultation crédible et légitime qui soit aussi représentatif et inclusif que possible ;
- L'élaboration d'un exposé raisonné sur les avantages d'une participation aux consultations électroniques ;
- La conception détaillée du processus de consultation électronique prévoyant notamment un langage accessible, des délais de participation suffisants et la prise en compte des besoins particuliers des publics cibles ;
- L'intégration au processus de mesures d'évaluation de la consultation électronique.

Les auteurs expliquent clairement que la consultation électronique ne peut en soi combler le déficit démocratique. Ils rappellent toutefois que la participation du public est un aspect clé du nouveau modèle de gouvernance démocratique. En y consacrant le temps, les ressources et les efforts nécessaires, un processus efficace de consultation électronique pourrait faire évoluer les perceptions de la population tout en renforçant sa confiance et son intérêt à l'égard de nos institutions démocratiques.

L'étude s'accompagne de deux commentaires issus du monde universitaire et des milieux d'intervention. Kathleen McNutt (Université de Regina) convient du potentiel de la consultation électronique comme outil de dialogue démocratique susceptible d'amoindrir le mécontentement face aux institutions démocratiques. Mais elle doute qu'on puisse ainsi raffermir la confiance du public si les gouvernements ne s'engagent pas à intégrer obligatoirement les résultats des consultations à l'élaboration des politiques. Sans modification substantielle du processus de valorisation de l'opinion publique, rien ne changera à la perception qu'a la population de la réceptivité et de l'action des gouvernements. Colin McKay (Commissariat à la protection de la vie privée du Canada) adhère également au diagnostic des deux auteurs et estime comme eux que la consultation électronique favoriserait la participation. Dans sa description des défis soulevés par son application, il fait toutefois une importante distinction entre la consultation des parties prenantes d'un enjeu et celle de la population en général. Dans ce dernier cas, le Royaume-Uni et les États-Unis, notamment en ce qui a trait à la campagne électorale de Barack Obama, offrent d'intéressants exemples. Mais il reste à voir si la participation en ligne peut exercer une réelle influence sur l'élaboration des politiques, ce qui constituerait le véritable test de la consultation électronique.

Summary

E-Consultation: Enabling
Democracy between Elections
by Joseph Peters and Manon Abud

A democratic deficit can manifest itself in a number of symptoms, such as low voter turnout, low participation in political parties, and declining trust in political leadership and democratic institutions. Another less recognized symptom of a democratic deficit is a gap between a population's preferences and the actions governments take, resulting in governments' inability to deliver on the results the population desires.

Many solutions have been proposed to cure this deficit, such as electoral reforms or increasing the political knowledge of young Canadians, but most of these solutions would be difficult to implement and would take considerable time to produce benefits. One thing that all the proponents of these solutions would agree on is that increased and more meaningful public involvement would improve discourse, expand dialogue and engage people in the decision-making processes of our democratic institutions.

In this study Joseph Peters and Manon Abud (Ascentum Inc.) start by making the case that Canada is in a state of democratic deficit, and then they propose e-consultation as a way to mitigate this deficit by increasing public involvement in democratic processes. While they admit that it is not a panacea for our democratic challenges, they demonstrate that it is an emerging approach and a tangible way for Canadian democratic institutions to make better decisions through an engaged public.

The authors define e-consultation as the use of information and communications technologies to involve different publics through different forms of interaction with democratic institutions. Among other benefits, they say, it could increase civic literacy and allow the public to be engaged in discourse and dialogue, thus addressing key symptoms of the democratic deficit, including closing the gap between expectations and what is actually delivered.

Peters and Abud then present some practical applications of e-consultation through several case studies. The first is in a parliamentary context: an e-consultation on mental health undertaken by the Senate of Canada. The second is a public administration consultation undertaken by Social Development Canada on priority issues such as care giving, child care, seniors, persons with disabilities and communities. The third is from the voluntary sector, the Canadian Medical Association's e-consultation with its membership on specialty care. The final example comes from outside the Canadian context, but provides a model to aspire to. It is an e-consultation initiative undertaken by the Government of New Zealand on prebirth testing. For each example the authors discuss strategic concerns, the approach that they

took, their findings, the challenges and what they learned in the process.

Based on the information presented in the case studies and their experience with public involvement and e-consultation, the authors make several policy recommendations for those involved in democratic governance and intending to conduct on-line consultations. These recommendations include the need to:

- create a credible and legitimate consultation process that is as inclusive and representative as possible;
- provide a rationale for participating in the consultation;
- ensure the design of the e-consultation is sound, e.g., that it uses accessible language, there is adequate time for participation and it incorporates the specific needs of the target audience(s); and
- build an evaluation into the process.

They emphasize that on its own e-consultation can not address the democratic deficit. However, they argue that public involvement is a key part of a new model of democratic governance. With time, resources and commitment, meaningful e-consultation could facilitate a shift in public perspectives and renew the public's belief, trust and interest in our democratic institutions.

Two commentators provide academic and practitioner perspectives. Kathleen McNutt (University of Regina) agrees with the authors that e-consultation has the potential to facilitate democratic dialogue and be an effective tool in overcoming citizen's discontent with modern democratic institutions. However, she challenges the idea that it can successfully contribute to an increase in public trust without a binding commitment from governments to incorporate into policy development the feedback they receive through the consultations. According to McNutt, without substantial changes to the process of valuing public input, citizens' perception of government responsiveness will remain unchanged. Colin McKay (Privacy Commissioner of Canada) also agrees with Peters' and Abud's diagnosis of the problem and the use of e-consultation to increase public involvement in democracies. He describes some of the main challenges of the process, drawing an important distinction between stakeholder consultations and broader public engagements. He also points to some interesting examples of the latter in the United Kingdom and the United States, for instance, its use by Barack Obama in his electoral campaign. He stresses that whether on-line engagement can be translated into the policy development process, which he sees as one of the greatest tests of e-consultation, remains to be seen.