Hearing Voices

The Experience of Online Public Consultations and Discussions in UK Governance

by Dr Stephen Coleman
with Nicola Hall and Milica Howell
Chapter 1

New Media, New Messages

We are, and should be, a Government that listens, a Government which includes all sides in the argument. (Prime Minister, Rt Hon Tony Blair MP, September 1999)

The time has come for a much broader public debate about how we effectively regulate modern communications and strike the balance between the privacy of the individual and the need to ensure our laws and society are upheld. (Home Secretary, Rt Hon David Blunkett MP, July 2001)

The job of the BBC is to find new ways of engaging the public in democratic debate. (Secretary of State for Culture, Media & Sport, Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP, February 2002)

We would welcome a public debate [on funding of political parties] and members of the cabinet should be free to take part in that debate without necessarily first reaching a collective line and then seeking to impose that collective line on the party, parliament and public. (Leader of the House of Commons, Rt Hon Robin Cook MP, April 2002)

The Government wants a genuinely open and balanced discussion on GM. There is clearly a wide range of views on this issue and we want to ensure all voices are heard. (Secretary of State for Rural Affairs, Rt Hon Margaret Beckett MP, July 2002)

Like any half-decent supermarket, Government is now in the business of listening to people – and being seen to hear what they say. In this they have been spurred on by the Public Administration Select Committee, whose chairman, Tony Wright MP, has observed that, ‘Our political culture is hostile to extensive political participation. That shapes the way in which we go about politics in this country and in Parliament’ and his Committee’s inquiry into Issues and Innovations in Public Participation concluded that, ‘deliberative techniques should be routinely employed to explore the views of citizens on appropriate issues of scientific uncertainty’. The OECD report on Citizens As Partners observed that, ‘Highly educated, well-informed citizens expect governments to take their views and knowledge into account when making decisions’, and outlines five reasons for governments strengthening their relationships with citizens:

- **Improve the quality of policy**, by allowing governments to tap wider sources of information, perspectives, and potential solutions in order to meet the challenges of policy-making under conditions of increasing complexity, policy interdependence and time pressures.

- **Meet the challenges of the emerging information society**, to prepare for greater and faster interactions with citizens and ensure better knowledge management.

- **Integrate public input into the policy-making process**, in order to meet citizens’ expectations that their voices be heard and their views be considered in decision-making by government.

- **Respond to calls for greater government transparency and accountability**, as public and media scrutiny of government actions increases and standards in public life are codified and raised.
- **Strengthen public trust in government** and reverse the steady erosion of voter turnout in elections, falling membership in political parties and surveys showing declining confidence in key public institutions.iii

These are worthy aims, but how can they be achieved? It is one thing for governments to say that they are listening, but another for them to actually listen, hear and learn. It is relatively easy to call for a public debate in which all arguments and all voices are heard, but quite another to stimulate the kind of public deliberation that can invigorate democratic decision-making. Dewey’s famous early 20th century search for the public is still relevant today:

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

Collecting, measuring and analysing public opinion is now a ubiquitous feature of democracy. The polling industry, launched by George Gallup less than 70 years ago, has become a major global business: the worldwide market for opinion research is estimated to be 17 billion euros; the UK market is estimated to be £1.147 billion and grew by 7% in 2001; candidates in the 2000 US presidential election spent $6 million on conducting campaign polls.v

Polling is a very crude measurement of what the public thinks. At best, it tells us what the public claims to think at any one particular moment, whether or not it has given any thought to an issue. At worst, polling collects pseudo-opinion and serves as a barometer for the state of public ignorance and prejudice.vi

Beyond simple polling, there has been a recent expansion of new methods for trying to hear the public voice - ranging from focus groups to deliberative polls to citizens’ juries. The aim of these is to conduct a qualitative evaluation of people’s thoughts, feelings, hopes and fears. In highly structured and sophisticated experiments, attempts are made to find out not simply what people think, but how they respond to new information and deliberative discourse.vii

The media, which have traditionally been the main reporters of public opinion, as collected by pollsters, are now devoting more time and space to opportunities for the public to state their own opinions directly via access slots, studio-audience discussions and phone-in programmes. The extent to which such formats present an unmediated channel for ‘the public voice’ to be heard is a matter for debate.viii. But, more than ever before, there is a rhetorical claim by the media to be presenting the public speaking for itself.

Ironically, as media infatuation with the public voice has grown, public interest in traditional political participation has declined. Almost every aspect of traditional participation - from voting to joining political parties to watching election coverage on TV - has declined precipitously in the past 30 years, not just in the UK, but in most advanced democracies.

There is some indication that the public’s political energy has shifted to other locations: single-issue campaigns, neighbourhood groups and consumer movements. One direction of this shift that has been under-explored is a movement towards direct expressions of opinion via the media. As it becomes clear to the public that politicians value their few seconds in a TV studio far more than their speech-making time in Parliament or their constituency surgeries, there is an understandable public urge to express opinions wherever possible via the media, where there is at least a chance of them being heard and answered, than via more opaque constitutional routes. If the medium is the message for politicians, why should it not be for the public?
For many, the rise of interactive, digital media such as e-mail and the internet heralded a new age of democracy where the people’s voice would be dominant. Traditional political representation was based upon the distance, both geographically and cognitively, between professional politicians and those they represented. The new media, it was argued, would transform politics: as Dick Morris, former strategic adviser to President Clinton and founder of vote.com argued, ‘Jefferson’s utopian vision of a democracy based on town meetings and direct popular participation is about to become a reality.’ix

For others, the claims for the new media were smaller, but more realistic. Graham Allen MP argued that, ‘new technology affords the possibility of cutting out … [the] middle person and directly inputting our views into the national, regional and local electronic parliaments.’x Rather than direct democracy, this was a vision of more direct representation, through open e-consultation. From the mid-1990s onwards a number of experimental exercises were established using the internet to connect the public voice to democratic policy-making. Blumler and Coleman identified seven benefits of online civic engagement:

1. **Transcending time.** Participants can discuss over a period of hours, days, weeks or months in an asynchronous fashion. This allows time for reflective debate.
2. **Transcending place.** Participation can be open to all, regardless of geographical spread.
3. **Making connections.** Connections can be made between groups online that would probably not have happened otherwise; politicians, who might not interact directly with citizens very often, find themselves in a position of unusual political intimacy with people who had traditionally formed part of their passive audience.
4. **Language of the people.** As in the case of many phone-ins, online discussion tends to be closer to the language of ordinary people.
5. **Community building.** Online civic engagement might begin by being narrowly focused on a local issue, but tends often to develop into a broader network, involving both online and offline connections between a range of people who would not have otherwise met and discovered what they shared.
6. **Recruitment of experience and expertise.** It is possible to recruit people to online discussions whose specific experiences and expertise can inform policy discussions. In the case of disadvantaged or marginalised groups, this can help to make policy formation more inclusive and reflective of real problems.
7. **Learning to deliberate.** Participants in online discussion can encounter new ideas and sources of information and new ways of thinking about issues.xi

Some early results of experimentation with e-consultations indicated that there was indeed scope for realising the opportunities listed above and thereby invigorating democratic representation. For example, the Womenspeak online consultation, conducted by the Hansard Society on behalf of the parliamentary All-Party Domestic Violence Group and Women’s Aid, connected hundreds of survivors of domestic violence to the parliamentary process and resulted in the submission of nearly a thousand pieces of evidence from women who would not otherwise have been heard.xii

E-democracy presents opportunities to strengthen and add value to representative democracy, but not to replace it. Opportunities, but not guarantees. E-democracy initiatives must be carefully designed and managed if they are to be of genuine use to the democratic process, rather than simple novelty value. Specific dangers to be avoided in such initiatives are social exclusivity, tokenism and technocracy.

The internet is at the moment a socially exclusive medium. Most people do not have access to it at home. Those who do tend to be richer and better educated. In the UK the number of people with home access to the internet is edging towards half the population; the number of people who have used the internet at some time is a clear majority. So, for the internet to be
used as a democratic resource, projects should not be built around the assumption that people
own their own computers and can access the internet in their homes. Access via public centres
(such as the 6,000 planned UK Online centres) and via other platforms, such as digital TV or
even mobile phones, should be an option for those without home access. The internet is also a
largely monolingual medium. In a multilingual society such as the UK, efforts need to be
made to provide content that can be understood by everyone.

A second pitfall of some e-democracy efforts has been a tendency to invite the public to
participate online and then to ignore them. Such tokenism is not exclusive to e-democracy: it
is a feature of many consultations where authorities are going through the motions of asking
the public what it thinks, but do not intend to take account of or respond to public views. If e-
democracy is to be more than a technological gimmick, it must be integrated into an effective
policy for democratic accountability.

A third danger of any new technology is that it becomes technocratically dominated. Too
much of what happens on the web is a result of technologists playing with the tools. The
internet is still a bewildering technology for many people to use – despite the overpowering
sales’ rhetoric. The agenda for e-democracy must be set by people who want a more effective
democracy, not by those who want to create bigger text files or snazzier online graphics.
CHAPTER 2

Where Are We Now?

Five years ago e-democracy was regarded as a largely speculative experiment. Today
governments are taking e-democracy seriously. The UK Government has published a policy
for the promotion of e-participation. The UK Parliament’s Information Committee has
reported that online consultation fora ‘can significantly enhance the work of the House, if
conducted with care’. The Scottish Parliament has run many online consultations (some of
which are examined in this report) and is committed in principle to using the internet to make
it an open and accessible legislature.

Policy is one thing, practice is another. The declarations of policy intent generally exceed the
practical experience in e-participation gained so far by governments and legislatures. In fact,
this is true of e-democracy in general: far more has been written by theorists and visionaries
than has yet been done in the realm of practice. This not an entirely bad thing: it is best to
work out what we want from e-democracy - and how it fits with other policies and projects -
before trying to do too much. The record of e-democracy experimentation at a national level
in the UK is therefore limited and any conclusions drawn from it should be seen as rather like
judging television by experimental broadcasts before it became a mass medium.

Nonetheless, there is a need for rigorous evaluation of what has been done so far, both at a
governmental and parliamentary level. The aim of this report is to evaluate e-consultations
run by UK Government Departments, the Hansard Society on behalf of the UK Parliament,
the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Executive.

In late 2001 all Government Departments were contacted and asked whether they were
currently running, or planned in the near future to run, online consultations or discussion fora.
Consultations tend to be centred on a single policy proposal, whereas discussion fora tend to
cover broader themes in a more discursive and sometimes diffuse fashion. Approximately 20
Government Departments or Agencies responded and over half of these were carrying out
some form of consultation using electronic means by posting consultation documents on web

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Online Consultations</th>
<th>Discussion Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home Office</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DTLR</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Executive</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DFES</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DTI</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet Office</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSE</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DWP</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HM Land Registry</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Complaints</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFWAT</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRO</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inland Revenue</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highways Agency</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVLA</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Law Commission</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Services Commission</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCHQ</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War Pensions Agency</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoH</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
sites (see Table 1). In the Departments and Agencies which responded, over 90 consultations were taking place. Many more closed consultations were accessible to users visiting their web sites. Only a few Departments and Agencies had online discussion groups and many of these were fairly new, so it was difficult for them to gauge their success. Some Departments and Agencies were considering developing discussion groups in the future. Most of the online discussion groups were targeted at specific groups of people/occupations or concentrated on a particular subject.

The Scottish Executive was by far the leader in this area, with 19 discussion groups covering a wide range of subjects, such as local economics, improving schools, genetic modification and adult literacy. But most of their online fora received very few messages from the public: out of 19 online discussion fora run from January 2001 to June 2002, 11 received fewer than 20 messages from the public.

In order to learn more about the use of consultation and discussion fora within UK governance, the Cabinet Office funded a research study, analysing 10 online fora. Five of these were run by UK Government departments, one by the Scottish Executive, one by the Scottish Parliament, one by the National Assembly for Wales and two by the Hansard Society for the UK Parliament (see Table 2). The research aimed to provide an overview and comprehensive summary of a number of executive and legislative online consultation/discussion fora, using both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies; examine the quality of public input to these fora; review official responses to the fora; and evaluate these exercises as experiments with embryonic channels of democratic communication and civic empowerment.

A three-fold qualitative and quantitative research methodology was used for this research. Firstly, the fora were analysed quantitatively. Key quantifiable variables were coded and tabulated, such as number of users, number of regular users and regularity of message posting. Secondly, content analysis techniques were used with a view to understanding the quality of the deliberation in the messages in the fora. Thirdly, in order to evaluate online consultation and discussion fora as a two-way process, researchers conducted a series of interviews with policy-makers and online managers at the DTI, Home Office, DTLR, the Scottish Parliament and the Hansard Society.

The number of messages posted to the sites examined in this study ranged from 23, posted over nine months, in the DTLR Neighbourhood and Street Wardens Community forum, to over 3,000 messages posted over the same period in the Home Office discussion forum on Police Reform. The sampling of messages mirrored the number of messages posted. Where discussion fora included fewer than 50 messages - as was the case with those hosted by the Cabinet Office, the DTLR and the Scottish Executive - these were not subjected to content analysis as the data was insufficient for such examination. Online consultations hosted on the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Hansard Society were analysed in total. The vast number of messages posted in the Home Office (3,000) and DTI (700) fora led us to adopt a stratified sampling frame to select a sample of 300 messages for each forum. A series of threads were selected at random; the seed message of each selected thread and all its corresponding replies were selected for content analysis. This avoided interrupting the flow of the discussions, which a more random sampling methodology would cause, and covered a wide range of the topics within the discussions/consultations. The content analysis included variables that measured the type of messages (whether a seed message or reply), the level of interactivity (relationship between messages), the quality of input (length, use of background information, question-raising, experience and fact versus opinion), and the attitude expressed in the response (cynical/sceptical versus positive). The content analysis coding frame and survey questionnaire are available from the Hansard Society.
### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum Name</th>
<th>Number of Messages Analysed</th>
<th>Number of Posters</th>
<th>Overall Number of Messages</th>
<th>Overall Number of Posters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet Office/Quality Networks</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DTLR/Neighbourhood and Street Wardens</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DTI/BeyondBricks</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>700</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Office/PoliceReform</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Scottish Executive/Adult Literacy</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Scottish Parliament/Chronic Pain</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>157</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Welsh Assembly/ICT Forum</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>215</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hansard Society/Flood Forum</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hansard Society/StemCell</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### i) Targeting and recruitment

The value of an online consultation or discussion is related to who is being consulted or invited to deliberate and how easy it is for them to do so. Most of the fora in our study were explicit about who they wanted to hear from. Most of the Government Department fora were aimed at small groups of specialists as is shown by their welcome messages:

**DTLR e-communities**

These communities can benefit staff across DTLR and various other government departments who have an interest in latest initiatives and developments in working practices, policy development and areas of professional interest.

**DTI Beyond Bricks forum**

Welcome to the Beyond Bricks community, the online space for internet entrepreneurs, investors and business support professionals.

**Home Office Police Reform forum**

The discussion forum is intended primarily for topics relating to police reform and for the discussion of items of professional interest. Please try to keep to the topic.

**DfES Forum for Small Businesses**

This Forum is for UK small businesses. The Department for Education and Skills aims to provide an electronic space where small businesses can exchange information and examples of best practice with each other and where they can engage with the Department on issues to do with skills and learning.

In other fora, the invitation to participate was to the general public:

**Scottish Executive’s Literacy and Numeracy Forum**

Welcome to the discussion forum on adult literacy and numeracy in Scotland. This is your chance to share your views with others that have an interest in this area. When adding your comments please provide some details of where you are from, and your occupation.

**Scottish Parliament Forum on Chronic Back Pain**

Our discussion forum is open to all and is a means through which members of the public and health professionals can interact with each other, let MSPs know of their experiences, and allow them to react directly to what is said by them in Wednesday’s debate.

**National Assembly for Wales forum on ICT in Wales**
Welcome to the Assembly’s Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Strategy discussion forum. The moderated forum represents a new dimension in the way the Assembly works, providing an immediate and direct opportunity for you to debate with others the issues arising from this important, emerging policy. Your comments are most welcome and will be of value to us in identifying what you see as our role in promoting the use of ICT by citizens, by the public sector, by private sector companies and by the education sector.

The Hansard Society’s consultation fora are aimed at people with a particular interest, experience or expertise in a subject, but anyone can register and take part, as was the case when the House of Lords Select Committee on stem cell research asked to receive online public evidence:

The Committee is keen for informed individuals, who may or may not have had prior involvement in the debate around stem cell research, to participate in the consultation. Taking part in this consultation will help ensure that the Committee has a wide, varied set of views to inform its recommendations on this controversial and important issue.

Community-orientated fora relied upon detailed registration procedures where, apart from name and e-mail address, participants were asked to provide other relevant personal details, such as their job title, company name and contact postal address. These guaranteed the authenticity of users, enhanced their sense of ownership of the discussion and added security to information-sharing on the site. Examples of successful community forums included the DTI hosted Beyond Bricks discussion forum, designed for internet entrepreneurs and the DfES hosted forum for UK Small Businesses. Less successful attempts at building online communities were the Quality Networks Discussion forum, hosted by the Cabinet Office and the DTLR’s Neighbourhood and Street Warden Community, designed as an exclusive forum for Neighbourhood Warden officers across the country; in the case of the former, there was no registration procedure and therefore, perhaps, no sense of ownership of the forum by participants; in the case of the DTLR community forum, the security of the sign-in procedure was so high that it was more of an obstacle than a gateway to the discussion forum.

Other fora, such as ones hosted by the Home Office and the Scottish Parliament, were aimed at the general public and therefore the registration procedure was reduced to a minimum. Only a log-in name and password were required for participants to post messages. In the discussion fora hosted by the Scottish Executive and National Assembly for Wales no registration at all was required: anyone could participate without providing any details about themselves.

How were participants recruited for these fora? From interviews with forum managers, it became clear that the main publicity and recruitment was through targeted leafleting and e-mails, and advertisements in local and national papers. If the forum was aimed at a particular profession - as with the Home Office forum for police officers or the DTLR sites - they were advertised in specialist magazines and newsletters. Marketing online forums requires energetic offline activity:

The site was advertised a lot over the first three months of launch in the varieties of trade press that covered our target market. We also held offline events in the run up to launch and a major launch party itself at the QE2 centre where the E-Minister made a speech. This in turn created a large amount of PR to start with. We also ran an elevator pitch competition alongside the offline events we continued to run after launch in places such as Brighton, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Sheffield, Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Aberdeen and Bristol - and there is still one to come in Birmingham. (DTI)
It is no good thinking ‘if you build it they will come’, you need to actively go out and recruit participants. The most effective recruitment seems to exploit the full range of communication avenues including local newspapers and radio, links from other websites, e-mail mailouts and word-of-mouth. Drawing up and contacting a list of relevant organisation - especially member organisations - is a good starting point but if you want to bring new voices then you have to be more inventive and think outside of the already established routes of contact on any particular topic. (Hansard Society)

The moderator of the National Assembly for Wales' Cymru Arlein forum on the future of Welsh ICT, observed that:

The technical issues are well known and relatively trivial. The main challenge is ensuring accessibility to the internet facilities and ensuring sufficient publicity to encourage people to make use of this.

The DTLR is looking into ways of enhancing participation in their electronic communities by delivering offline training to users:

We are just starting some work with our Neighbourhood and Street Warden Community delivering some training to get people to think about how to operate in an electronic community environment, and how to be more proactive about using discussion fora. We will do it the old-fashioned way. We would deliberately try not to create a workshop on electronic communities but, in fact, try to identify what this electronic community could do and then work with trainers on the communities themselves and build it into their normal training, so that it becomes much more an integral part of what they want to do.

**ii) Who participated?**

Given that both the internet and political discussion tend to be male-dominated, we wanted to find out the extent of gender balance in these fora. Our study found that participants’ gender-profile is very much topic-related and reflects the more traditional divisions of interest between men and women. On the DTI site, which was business-orientated, only 4% of participants were female; only 6% of participants in the National Assembly for Wales discussion forum on ICT issues were female; 16% of participants in the Home Office police forum were women. Women were more willing to take part in online discussions when the discussion topics related to problems of everyday life and personal experience. In the Hansard Society’s online consultation on flooding, 25% of posters were women and in the Hansard Society consultation on stem cell research 44% were women. The biggest online engagement of women in our study - and the only time when female outstripped male posting - was in the Scottish Parliament’s highly experiential consultation on chronic back pain, where 54% of postings were from women.

**iii) The nature of online talk**

What kind of communication took place in these fora? It is too easy to arrive at impressionistic accounts of the structure and quality of online discussion. Using content analysis, our study sought to answer four questions:

- How much of the discussion was ‘on-topic’, i.e. relevant to the explicit purpose of the forum?
- What was the quality of messages posted in these fora, i.e. were they mainly based upon opinion or experience or factual information?
• How interactive were these online discussions? Were they really discussions, in the sense of people listening to and responding to one another, or were they serial monologues?
• To whom were messages addressed? Who did participants think they were speaking to when they posted messages?

Analysing such qualitative variables is problematical. Researchers coded the messages analysed on the basis of agreed criteria intended to diminish scope for subjective or biased interpretation.

a) **Message Relevance**
A clear finding from our research was that the majority of participants in all fora confined their discussion to the forum topic. Few messages were off-topic:

b) **Message Quality**
We classified messages on the basis of the following variables:

- those which only expressed an opinion
- those which conveyed personal experience relating to the topic
- those which raised questions
- those which supported their arguments with facts and new information

Most participants in most fora posted messages which simply stated their opinions; these accounted for 82% of messages on the Home Office site; 57% on the DTI site and 66% in the National Assembly for Wales fora, but that tendency decreased on the Hansard Society’s *Flood Forum* with 48%, and in the Scottish Parliament forum on *Chronic Pain* with 35%. 91% of messages posted in the Hansard Society consultation on stem cell research simply expressed an opinion.

The more that women were present in fora, the more experiential the messages were. For example, in the Scottish Parliament forum on *Chronic Back Pain*, where over half of the messages posted were by women, 38% of the messages related to participants’ experience, whereas on the Hansard Society’s *Flood Forum*, where only one in four messages were posted by women, the percentage fell to 26% of messages (although 39% of messages from women to that forum were experiential).

Unsurprisingly, messages raising questions were mainly posted in fora which considering ‘technical’ issues. This was especially the case on the DTI’s *Beyond Bricks* forum, which stated that providing advice was one of its main objectives and where 19% of messages posed a question.

Very few participants in the fora seemed to use facts in their deliberations - for example, citing relevant statistics, quoting a newspaper article or other secondary source.

c) **Participant Interaction and Community-Building**
The level of interaction in the fora indicates the extent to which participants were listening to one another and building virtual communities. The highest level of interaction (measured on the basis of participants replying to and commenting on previous messages) was between participants in the DTI’s *Beyond Bricks* discussion forum – 84%. The DTI’s forum set out to build an online community, so the high percentage of interaction was a sign of clear success. This was followed by 77% on the Home Office police reform forum. One reason for the popularity of this site, according to participants, was the absence of a community forum on the Police Federation web site. Instead of posting
comments about current police reform, police officers used the Home Office online
discussion for bonding and network building.

A DTI sponsor of the Beyond Bricks forum, interviewed for this research, commented
on one significant outcome:

*There were specific examples of individuals finding each other from different
part of the country and forming a joint venture or a company together,
becoming each others' directors and so forth.*

d) Aim of messages
A key value of digital ICT is the two-way flow of communication. The question must
therefore be asked, in the context of e-democracy: is anyone at the Government end
listening? Unfortunately, the answer appears to have been negative in the case of most of
the fora examined in this study. The most acute example of Government disengagement
from communication with online participants was in the Home Office forum on police
reform where 95% of participants were police officers, but no official or politician from
the Home Office posted a single message. The moderator told us that:

*I have suggested having a live debate with the Minister - a two hour live chat
- but in the end it has never happened.*

MPs and MSPs were more responsive to fora connecting the public to their legislative
representatives. 3% of messages in the Scottish Parliament forum came from six
MSPs; four MPs took part in the Hansard Society Flood Forum, contributing 1% of
all messages; officials from the National Assembly for Wales contributed 2% of
messages in the Cymru-Arlein discussion forum on ICT.

Though mainly absent as participants in the fora, Government and Parliament had
more messages directed to them than any other person or institution. 44% of
messages to the Hansard Society’s Flood Forum were addressed to Government, as
were 26% of messages in the Home Office’s Police Reform forum and 13% in the
DTI Beyond Bricks forum.

But, when analysed as negative/sceptical or positive/constructive, it became clear that
most messages directed to Government or Parliament were critical or attacking. Of
messages addressing the Government, cynical or sceptical attitudes were expressed
by 88% in the Police Reform forum, 73% in the Hansard Society’s Flood Forum and
50% in the DTI Beyond Bricks forum. Positive attitudes toward the Government were
expressed in only 5% of messages in Flood Forum, 6% in Police Reform and 19% in the
DTI Beyond Bricks forum.

iv) Moderation policies
In any gathering of more than a few friends, some form of chairing or moderation is useful. In
an online context, moderation has come to be regarded as an even more important function: a
means of setting out the agenda, prompting new messages, keeping postings friendly and
relevant, maintaining the rules of the discussion space and, where appropriate, summarising
the arguments as they develop, so that the online discussion does not lose its way. Coleman
and Gotze have summarised the key tasks of online moderators:

*Those facilitating online engagement in policy deliberation will only be trusted if
they:*
i) set out clear and transparent rules for participants, e.g. maximum length of
messages; maximum frequency of messages; attitudes to offensive language
and defamation;

ii) regulate the discussion, both by implementing agreed rules and adhering to
ethical principles, such as data privacy, political neutrality and non-
coercion;

iii) moderate discussion messages, ensuring that any participant with a point to
make receives a fair hearing and that the discussion is conducted on a fair
and friendly basis;

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

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

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

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

The most active moderators in our study were in the DfES and DTI fora. These moderators
were known by their names, their personal e-mail addresses were published and, most
importantly, they were active - though impartial - contributors to the debate. All subscribers
to these fora were automatically subscribed to community e-newsletters co-ordinated by the
moderators. Their enthusiasm was impressive and effective.

In contrast, the Home Office Police Reform forum had a policy of ‘silent’ moderation:
officials running the forum never responded to any comments from participants. Though two
Home Office officials monitored the forum on a daily basis, there were no contact details for
them on the site, but only for an anonymous ‘administrator’ with a Home Office e-mail
address. The policy of ‘silent’ moderation prevented the moderators from either responding to
direct questions or explaining why they were not responding. Furthermore, the moderators
were unable to explain their operational management of the site, so there was no proactive
attempt to steer the discussion or explain deletions of messages. This resulted in a
conspiratorial image of the moderator, with a number of threads dedicated to fighting against
Big Brother-like, invisible moderators. This caused the debate to become dissipated and off-
topic threads to proliferate. The fact that the forum was not interactively moderated and that
no feedback or contributions were provided by the Government led police officers to
effectively take over the space as an autonomous area. Participants felt free to talk about
issues of interest to them, without any need to address the Home Office who were the
sponsors of the forum. Indeed, cautionary messages were sometimes posted by participants
who feared that the forum might have been a tool of surveillance by the Government.

The DTLR and Scottish Parliament adopted a pre-moderation model, whereby the forum
moderator reads all messages first and then posts them up on the site. Most of the fora in our
study were post-moderated: messages could be put up directly by any registered – and, in
some cases, unregistered – participants.

The DTI appointed an independent moderator, associated with the subject of the discussion,
for their Beyond Bricks forum. Several officials in Government departments were of the view
that there was a need for skills training in online moderation. As one of them told us,
There is no general guidance about moderation, so we are managing things as we go along. There should be more guidance and advice for web managers.

The Hansard Society’s online consultation project manager was of the view that

It is very important that the moderator’s unique role is defined and recognised as an important job requiring particular skills and abilities, not just an extra task bolted on to another job.

v) Government Responsiveness

The claim of e-democracy is that fora of the kind examined here enable citizens to interact more effectively with Government and elected representatives. To what extent did these online consultation and discussion fora lead to such interaction? There are two main measures of such interaction: the extent of participation in the fora by Government and elected representatives, and the degree to which views expressed in the fora had any influence on policy.

As reported above, few Government officials or politicians participated in the fora. Although messages were directed to them, they did not respond as online participants. As long as it was clear to participants that they were not being invited to have a direct dialogue with a Minister, MP or MSP, this was not in itself a problem. But too often nothing was said about who was listening to the discussion and what would happen to points raised. It was as if the public were being invited to a party, but nobody told them where the hosts had gone and when they would be arriving to join them. As one official at the DTLR put it:

Electronic fora will not work on their own. I do not believe that you can just create them and leave them there and expect people to use them. There has to be an element that ties in with things offline and gets people to understand how it could genuinely help them with their work. That is more challenging than dealing with the software side. You are dealing very much with a culture change.

A DTI sponsor of the Beyond Bricks forum was sanguine about the value of persuading politicians to engage with such fora:

Beyond Bricks offers an interesting forum and if, for example, a new Government Minister, or even PM, wants to have a dialogue with this particular community, this will not be a bad place to come for that type of dialogue.

Government officials were less hopeful about the capacity of these fora to have any influence on policy. A Home Office official commented that:

The trouble is that for policy development you need people who are informed about policy to give rational, constructive comments. They do not need to be experts, but just to be informed about the topic they are talking about, based on informed opinions or facts rather than on some rumour in the press.

A DTI official considered that:

Influencing policy through the discussion forum is not the objective per se. But the mechanism is already there: there are polls, there are discussion groups. So asking ‘what do you think about this or that Bill that has been drafted - your contribution will be welcome’ would certainly engender quite a bit of discussion.
Quite a bit of discussion, maybe, but to what end? What is the value of inviting citizens to discuss a policy or Bill if nobody at the other end is going to take any notice of them?
CHAPTER 3

Citizenspace – An Experiment In E-Democracy

UK Online is the Government’s central information portal. The Citizenspace section of UK Online was designed to enable citizens to enter into an interactive relationship with Government. Within Citizenspace, users can access a register of current government consultations. Until June 2002 there was also a discussion forum in which users could express views about a range of government-related topics.

Citizenspace soon proved to be one of the most popular features of the UK Online portal, with approximately 35,000 registered users. Over 40,000 messages were posted in the discussion forum in its first six months (from June 2001 to January 2002.) Users posted an average of 130 messages each day. There were 14 discussion topics, attracting between 200 and 17,000 messages each.

In order to evaluate Citizenspace as a forum for public deliberation, 50 messages were selected as a sample from eight of the discussion topics. A series of threads were selected at random. The seed message of each selected thread and all its corresponding replies were selected for content analysis. This avoided interrupting the flow of the discussions (which a more random sampling methodology would cause) and covered a wide range of the topics within Citizenspace. The content analysis included variables which measured the type of response and interactivity (whether a seed message or reply) the quality of response (length, use of background information, fact versus opinion) and the context of the response (whether positive or negative content).

We began by testing the flow of the messages: Were people listening and talking to each other or ignoring and talking across each other? Of messages coded, 17% were ‘seed’ messages (they started a new topic); 68% followed the topic of the preceding messages in a thread; 12% ignored the topic of preceding messages in a thread; and 4% of messages were removed for a violation of the forum rules. This demonstrates a reasonable level of interaction between the participants and logical progression of the threads.

The number of words in each message was measured. This provided some indication of the depth of the discussions and the extent to which people were developing longer arguments. In the sample of 400 messages a total of 31,687 words were written. On average, there were 79.2 words per message. 30% of the messages had 25 words or fewer and around 75% of the messages had fewer than 100 words. This suggests a low level of argument development, more typical of an online chat room than a forum for policy deliberation. By comparison, the BBC Online EastEnders forum had, at the same time, 51.5 words per message. The much more deliberative Hansard Society online consultation on stem cell research (see above) had 345 words per message.

The quality of messages was coded, using variables similar to those in the previous section. 44% stated an opinion; 14% referred to factual information; and 4% of messages violated the forum’s behaviour code.

One factor that seems overwhelmingly to be the case in UK Online is the negativity of many of the comments. A variable was included in the content analysis to provide some measure of this element. In all discussions there will inevitably be positive and negative comments made – but the negative atmosphere and sarcasm inherent in Citizenspace tended to outweigh any positive comments made. The variable measured positivity/negativity on a 1-5 scale: 1 being Very Positive (message contains praise for someone/something, makes positive suggestion) through to 5 Very Negative (message content removed for negative content, or contains
abusive/negative comments). Of the messages coded as either positive or negative, 28% were positive (6% very, 22% fairly) and 72% were negative (10% very, 62% fairly.)

Was this negativity a reflection of a broad public mood or of a few people who dominated the forum? A sample of 300 messages from three of the discussion threads was analysed in order to explore how many registered users were posting messages in the Citizenspace fora. The number of times each participant contributed to the sample of threads was counted. This analysis revealed the dramatic finding that 70% of all messages were posted by just 18% of users. 38.5% of message-posters contributed only one message. In short, the forum was overwhelmingly dominated by regular, frequent posters.

Of the 300 messages analysed there were a total of 91 users, 17 of whom contributed to two or more discussions and could be classified as frequent posters. Citizenspace’s vocation is as a space where the public can voice their views and gain responses from Government representatives. But of the 35,000 people currently registered with Citizenspace, a mere 0.6% post any messages – a sure indication that it lacks the confidence of most UK Online visitors, let alone the public at large.

A fundamental weakness of Citizenspace concerned the lack of responsiveness. The forum currently invites users to ‘Have your say on government policy and share your views with other users by taking part in our online discussion groups’. At an earlier stage, it had not only invited users to express their views, but also promised that a summary of these would be presented to the Prime Minister. As this is a Government site there is an assumption – once explicit, now implicit – that the Government is listening to what is being said.

There are three ways that Government could appear to be listening to what is going on:

  i) there could be periodic responses from Government Departments to comments raised on the site;
  ii) there could be regular summaries of comments made on the site, presented to Departments and published online;
  iii) the moderators, acting on behalf of the Government, could respond to some messages, especially when specific questions are raised.

None of the above happened in the case of the Citizenspace fora. i) and ii) used to happen on the Number Ten discussion forum, but were never tried within Citizenspace. The danger of i) or ii) would have been to suggest that these comments were in any sense an informed or representative sample of public thinking; this research indicates that, generally speaking, they were neither of these.

The disastrous policy of ‘silent’ moderation prevented the moderators from either responding to direct questions or explaining why they were not responding. The moderators, an independent company appointed by the Cabinet Office, were seen by users as arrogant and unlistening. Furthermore, in deciding a policy of never responding to any comments, the moderators are unable to explain their operational management of the site, so there is no proactive attempt to steer the discussion, appeal for better behaviour by participants or explain deletions of messages. Users of the site have developed a conspiratorial picture of the moderators. Much of the discussion is about the moderators and how to beat them. On one occasion personal information about moderators appeared online. This is unavoidable unless the current policy is abandoned and the moderators become vocal participants with an accountable role.

Ultimately, the Citizenspace experiment lacked a clear purpose or connection to Government policy-making. For a handful of enthusiasts it provided an outlet for ill-informed opinion, prejudice and abuse. For most users, it held out the promise of interaction with Government, but proved to be a one-way street leading nowhere.
CHAPTER 4

Commbill.net – An Experiment In Law-Making Online

In May 2002 a Joint Committee was established by orders of both Houses of Parliament to consider and report on the draft Communications Bill. The Committee was required to agree its final Report by August 7. The Committee introduced two important innovations:

- The public was able to see and hear all of its evidence sessions which were web cast live on Parliament’s own site http://www.parliamentlive.tv and broadcast on BBC Parliament the following weekend.
- In order to gather a wider range of views on the draft Bill, the Committee commissioned an online forum, under the auspices of the Hansard Society and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, to accompany its formal evidence-taking.

There had been a number of previous online consultations run by the Hansard Society for parliamentary committees, but this was the first to consider a specific piece of legislation. The Committee’s chairman, Lord Puttnam, was enthusiastic about the value of the online forum, stating that:

*The online consultation worked exceptionally well, and proved its worth as a vital tool in the democratic process. I am sure future committees will find it as invaluable as we did. The responses were of a very high quality, and gave us a real sense of public opinion across a wide range of issues. We should promote future fora as aggressively as possible to maximise participation.*

The forum ran from June 10 until July 8 at its own web address, www.commbill.net. 373 participants were registered, of whom 136 (36%) posted 222 messages. 82% of registered users were individuals not attached to any organisation and they posted 44% of messages in the forum.

In a post-consultation survey, 80 (21%) of registered users completed questionnaires. 17.5% of these had attended one or more of the committee’s hearings; 26% had watched the Committee’s proceedings on the web; 16% had watched the Committee on BBC Parliament; 31% submitted evidence to the Committee. Half of the survey respondents were from outside London, just over half had had contact with their MPs in the past and 19% were members of political parties.

The moderation of Commbill.net aimed to ensure that everyone had a fair chance to make their points, that the discussion flowed and was regularly stoked by any developments in the inquiry, and that regular summaries of the evidence submitted via the forum were produced. The contributions were summarised by the Hansard Society, reported back to the Committee, and posted on the web site on a weekly basis. Commbill.net was designed with the idea of giving participants as much background information and links to other relevant sites as possible to enable them to contribute messages and navigate the forum easily.

Both in the Committee’s regular meetings and in its final report, the online forum was taken seriously and had a genuine impact. The Committee’s report referred 22 times to the online forum. Two of its key policy recommendations came directly from evidence presented via the forum: appointment of the Chair of the Consumer Panel by the Consumer Panel itself and licensing and restrictions in respect of religious broadcasting.
In the post-consultation survey, 30% of respondents believed that the Committee was interested in what they had to say, while 5% thought that they would not be interested. 77% thought that the online consultation would, or possibly would, make a difference to the Committee’s recommendations; 11% believed that the consultation would make no difference. 72% said that they learned something by reading what other contributors had to say; 21.5% did not. 72% thought that the online consultation was a worthwhile exercise, while 15% were unsure and 2.5% did not. 91% of participants were of the view that Parliament should run more online consultations in the future.

How useful was the forum for those who used it? Although 373 people registered for the forum, only 136 submitted comments. This did not mean that the majority who followed the discussion were not participating. Some of the registered users preferred to be ‘lurkers’ - only reading others’ contributions and watching the debate rather than taking an active part in it.

In the post-consultation survey of the registered users, we asked non-posters to explain their silent participation. The following comments were typical of their answers:

*There was not enough time to do so and I enjoyed being an observer.*

*Other work took precedence at the time which meant I had little time to digest the material published in full, hence was reluctant to comment; nevertheless I observed frequently.*

*I did not submit a personal message mainly because I did not feel I knew enough about the topic, and time reasons.*

*I was gaining knowledge.*

*Seemed like people who were submitting were just continuing offline conversations and assuming background knowledge. Felt more like a panel of 'experts' than citizens.*

*I preferred to watch the debate develop and take note of the points raised.*

These are surely legitimate reasons for not submitting comments. In a democratic discussion not everyone has to speak; observing and learning are also democratic activities.

Several of the individuals and organisations contributing comments to the forum also contributed traditional written evidence to the Committee. Why did they choose to use the forum?

*We did submit written evidence and contribute to the online forum. We thought it would start a discussion on particular items. By posting an opinion you would get counter views and then you would be able to find what the true consensus is on the particular area.*

*We said in our written evidence to the Committee that there is something missing from the Bill, but people coming to the online forum had not seen our written evidence, so we wanted to tell them too and then it was up to them to make their views known. It was a test for us to see whether people were concerned about the issues we were raising. It also gave us the opportunity to comment on the oral evidence being given by others. It meant that we were not left with just one contribution in our own evidence but could make a comment on what other people were saying.*

We asked participants what they found useful about the Commbill.net forum:
It was a lot easier for ordinary people to go online than to get a big document on paper, read through it and then write a letter for a submission to a Government department. The Committee was receiving evidence largely from a big group of industrial interest groups which had been following the consultations on communications reform for five years. And it ends up being a very narrow group. But in the online forum other voices were coming in, voices that are not normally heard. It also gave a chance for a wider set of issues to be debated than those which the Committee itself had set out.

The online system helped enormously. For example, I could print off various documents instead of having to wait to get them through the Stationery Office.

Throughout the consultation I was on a learning curve, listening to other people. Even if I disagreed with them it was refreshing. There was a sense of rational debate taking place.

Most of the time Parliament is just a remote idea. I like the fact that there is a little bit of energy around it and any relationship that might flow from these small beginnings might be extremely valuable.

It's important in any consultation to enable people to participate through a number of different mechanisms – if you have just one means you end up excluding people or you make it more difficult for them to take part. Anything that enables people to take part directly in that way is a good thing and could only help them feel that Parliament is much closer to them.

In personal interviews with members of the Committee, their sense of the value and limitations of the online consultation was explored. We asked them what they found useful about the Commbill.net forum:

It helped us change the questions we were asking the witnesses and made us focus on areas we would not necessarily have thought of. It tended either to reinforce something that we already knew or it changed questions that we would not otherwise have asked. **Brian White MP**

It opens it up to a wider range of people to feed ideas and opinions into the parliamentary process. The fact that we were able to get ideas and opinions from the regions - particularly input on the importance of regional broadcasting - meant that the exercise was not restricted to Whitehall and Westminster. It allowed us to get on the road, electronically. The alternative would have been to hold a series of public meetings around the country. In my view, it was an advantage to the credibility of the Committee and its work. One benefit of this consultation is reinforcing policies that are already well known and throwing up the concerns that may not previously have arisen. The argument against it is that you have to have the facility to participate in an online forum. **Lord McNally**

We thought it worked very well – it clearly was popular, we had very a substantial response, we had very good information and we incorporated some of the points that came out from the online forum in our recommendations. **Lord Crickhowell**

What were the main problems associated by Committee members with the online consultation?

It undoubtedly involved having quite a lot of people involved, and quite a heavy workload. Besides over 200 pieces of evidence submitted in the online forum, we also
had a huge weight of evidence, written and oral, so we were relying very heavily on
the summaries and key points picked out for us by our staff. The workload on this
Committee, taken all together, was enormous and we were doing the job without
sufficient time. Lord Crickhowell

The problem was that we needed somebody to facilitate it, someone like the Hansard
Society, to be an intermediary. As a Committee member you just could not look
through the forum and do everything else. It was all right this time because there was
just one consultation running and therefore the Hansard Society was giving all the
support they could. If there were several online consultations running at the same
time, that could be a problem in the future. Time management is also crucial. One of
the problems we had was that we had such a tight deadline, therefore we could only
have four weeks of the online forum. I would contribute more had I had more time.
What would be ideal is to have a forum for a couple of weeks before the Committee
gets up and running and then you could start to use some of that evidence for when
the Committee decides the way it wants to work. If you have a consultation up and
running before the Committee takes on board whatever they are going to look at, you
could actually have much more wide-ranging discussions on some of the principles.
Brian White MP

The down-side of largeness is management – it becomes more expensive. It could be
used and abused by professional lobbyists. But I think that is a risk worth taking. And
with the relevant expertise we should be able to weed out organised lobbying, just as
we can from a letter writing campaign. Lord McNally

We asked participants in the Commbill.net consultation how they would improve the process
in the future. A selection of responses from forum participants, parliamentarians and
Committee staff follow:

Identify issues in advance and advise people not to submit written evidence on these,
but to participate in an online forum.

A committee itself has to be committed to the process. Don’t do it because you have
to, because someone else has done it. Do it because Members genuinely believe that
it might be a way of attaining a wider range of views and reflecting personal
experience.

In the future you should focus on the added value, what you are not getting by other
means. Focus the forum on issues where individual experience really matters.

Having oral evidence sessions with participants from the online forum could be an
incentive to participate in the forum, just as when you submit a good piece of written
evidence you might be invited to give oral evidence. Or, if you are an effective
contributor to an online forum, you might be invited for oral evidence.

I would recommend as best practice what the Communications Bill Committee has
done, in terms of getting members involved with regular feedback from the
moderator.

There is also a legal question about whether people engaged in an online forum are
in any way protected by parliamentary privilege. We know that the witnesses to a
parliamentary committee are protected by parliamentary privilege. If someone says
something in an online forum that his employer does not like, his employer might
come under parliamentary contempt.
That is the challenge: to try to reach those other voices and to look into ways of chopping off the usual suspects, with a kind of bar saying we don’t want to hear from organisations, for instance. If you are an organisation, we want written evidence. This forum is for individuals. It is either written evidence or online forum, but we don’t want people playing in both divisions.

Time management is at the heart of everything. If we do not crack the question of our working arrangements, both MPs and Government, then I am not sure we will take the full advantage of it. Our workload in all the other areas is not decreasing but increasing and that is the biggest problem of it all. You cannot fit more in to a working day unless you change the whole culture or put in the extra resources. We have to look at it seriously and ask ourselves: Are we just doing five things badly instead of three things well? And that is what people will ask – is it better for me to go to my traditional select committee and write letters to my constituency and do that well or to do all of that and do an online consultation and do e-mails and do web sites and end up doing them all, but badly? I think this online consultation on the Draft Communications Bill was a good experiment in trying to bridge some of those gaps and using moderators to overcome some of these questions.

I would have liked the deliberations and the hearings of the witnesses by the Committee to be broadcast live on the radio. I don’t think that watching it on TV added much to it and radio is quite an inexpensive medium.

Make sure that at every stage in the process people have equal access and that would help them to have more meaningful access in an online forum. You should look at who are the groups that are going to find it most difficult to make contributions online and how then to reach them. You ought to specifically target disabled people, at the early stages. Feedback is also the crucial thing. Having feedback arrangements is labour intensive and it is a question of resources, but it is really important that at the end of a consultation you could see that a committee has actually taken on board some of the contributions or why they have not. Anyone who participated in the forum should get a copy of the report.
CHAPTER 5

Where To Now?

Online discussion and consultation is still in an experimental phase. Experimentation should continue. There are no experts in this field yet.

This research study has shown how some online fora have failed to add much to the quality of public participation and others have contributed added value to traditional consultation procedures. It should be clear from this research that engaging citizens online is about much more than setting up a web site and inviting the public to ‘have their say’ in the name of e-democracy. Interactivity requires serious commitment from governments and representatives who really want to hear and learn from people with something to say. To get the best out of this, there is a clear need for an explicitly stated purpose for any online forum; clear rules and democratic moderation of the forum; an interest by citizens in sharing their experiences and expertise with decision-makers; and a willingness by government/politicians to respond to public input. We set out below a set of practical criteria for future online consultations and discussions:

- **Purpose** – create a purpose for the deliberations (a role within government or parliamentary consultation procedure), which adds value for both citizens and policy-making.

- **Responsiveness** – provide a feedback mechanism to the users.

- **Provide a list of key questions or starting points to trigger debate in specific areas** – these should be set by parliamentary committees or Government departments during consultation periods on specific issues.

- **Transparent moderation** – always forewarn users when a comment is removed, and offer a chance to re-submit the amended message. Make the rules of engagement and all moderator decisions transparent.

- **Active moderation** – consultations and discussions benefit from proactive moderation: ‘the moderator as participant’. Moderators should post messages asking questions, probing, taking on a role as ‘seminar leader’ rather than invigilator or referee. Positive interruptions (such as giving additional information, newspaper articles, links to relevant web sites) should be encouraged and welcomed. The moderator should aim to build a rapport with all users, so that no single participant or group of participants dominates the discussion and new entrants feel secure and confident to enter the discussion. Promoting an inclusive atmosphere is vital.

- **Guest moderation** – invite representatives from Parliament or Government departments to moderate relevant discussions. The presence of a moderator as a ‘real person’ enhances the quality of the discussions, encourages more ‘civilised’ deliberation and allows greater control over the direction of the discussion.

- **Detailed registration and recruitment** – use of a more detailed registration procedure will allow targeting of specific groups of users who may have relevant experience or knowledge in specific consultation areas or subjects. Not all participants will be able to participate in all topics, but instead target specific people for specific issues. Registration procedures should include an ‘areas of personal interest’ field; targeted e-mails can then be sent to groups of people with similar interests (e.g. people interested in consultations on health issues).
• **Thread sequence** – the discussion topic order should change according to which topic was used most recently. This would direct people to participate in current discussions and build a dialogue flow.

• **Summaries** – weekly discussion summaries should be posted on the site, so that new users do not need to read all messages to find out what has been said. These summaries will help prevent old ground being re-visited, fertilise the debate, keep lapsed users up-to-date and trigger re-entry. An archive of all previous summaries should be kept on the site.

• **E-mail summaries** – e-mail weekly updates and summaries to those who request them or who have demonstrated interest in an area.

• **Partnerships** - Work with nationally networked partners and smaller local groups to gain ideas for discussion topics and request evidence for the consultations.

• **Local government** - Take a targeted approach to working with local government. Link the online consultation into local projects. Inform all local government as soon as the details of the consultation are fixed and try to link into local scale projects in various areas.

• **MPs’ and civil service role** – Clearly define role of Parliament, MPs and Government departments. Agreement needs to be reached about the level of involvement each player will contribute. Suggest that different players with different interests take on a particular section of the site (a specific thread) and monitor it, place comments etc.

• **Web links** – Create links to as many relevant web sites as possible: governmental, parliamentary, community, e-democracy, educational and media web sites; relevant information sites such as helplines, charities and citizens’ advice bureaux. This provides a value-added service to users and will facilitate a more informed debate. Offer ‘click-throughs’ to specially created information (such as ‘How does policy-making work?’ ‘How can my participation help me and help the government?’) and links to other sites.

• **Research versus questionnaires** - Balance the need to collect data about participants with the chance of putting them off with a lengthy form. Develop a compromise between these two poles based on extended conversations and advice from various community workers on how best to word any participant survey.

• **Reminder e-mails and SMS** - Use reminder e-mails and SMS messages with a “click-through” to the web site at regular intervals during the consultation (weekly and when important events occur.

• **Disabilities** – Adopt as far as possible the RNIB guidelines on how to make web sites more usable for people with sight deficits (for example specific font sizes and background colours). Take advice from various groups working with disability issues to make the site as user-friendly as possible.

• **Help section** – provide a thorough, user-friendly ‘help’ section, which gives ideas about participating as well as how to physically use the site (e.g. Q&A on ‘what should I write?’ ‘how much should I write?’).

There is, of course, more to e-democracy than online consultations and discussion fora; nor are governments and legislatures the only institutions that can usefully sponsor such exercises. This report has concentrated on a limited, but important area of e-democracy experimentation, with a view to stimulating discussion about its present and future value. As
long as politicians invite the public to ‘debate’ various issues and purport to be ‘listening’ to
the public’s voice, there will be a need to test, expand and think innovatively about these
channels of two-way governance.

REFERENCES

1 Hansard, House of Commons, 29 Nov 2001, Column 326WH
2 Public Administration Select Committee Report, Public Participation: Issues and Innovations, Vol I, paragraph 53
3 Citizens As Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making, OECD, 2001, pp.19-20
5 Taylor Nelson Sofres Annual Report, 2001
10 Wired,
11 Blumler, J.G. and Coleman, S., Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace, IPPR/Citizens Online, 2001
12 Coleman, S and Normann, E., New Media & Social Inclusion, Hansard Society, 2000
13 Information Select Committee Report, Vol 3, Draft Principles: Fleshing Out the Details, paragraph 47
15 These are taken from recommendations in Coleman and Normann, New Media & Social Inclusion (2000) and Hall, N., Building Digital Bridges (2001), both published by the Hansard Society.