Online Policy Consultation and the Development of E-democracy in Australia: Examples, Challenges and Possibilities

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Who am I? Current research

- Democracy in interactive environments
- Digital divide, civil society and literacies for effective democratic citizenship
- Applications of single source digital publishing using XML to online policy consultation and e-learning
- Online performance of Australian political party websites
Who am I? Current research

- Smart Communities Research Project: integrated government services and regional networked neighbourhoods supporting ‘at risk’ individuals
- The Smith Family: information sharing and governance (Microsoft Unlimited Potential Project)
- Information and governance: WSIS
- Convergent technologies: iTV Lab
Overview of presentation

1. Online policy consultation in context
   - Definition of e-democracy
   - Typology of activities
   - Examples of online engagement

2. Challenges
   - Roles of politicians, public servants and citizens

3. Towards a continuum of citizen engagement
   - Deliberative strategies
E-democracy “is the use of... ICT... and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in all kinds of media (e.g. the Internet, interactive broadcasting and digital telephony) for purposes of enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication”

Source: Hacker and van Dijk 2000, p.1
Typology of e-democratic activities

(a) E-government
(Government info & services, civics & citizenship education)

(b) Participatory
(Online consultation, petitions, e-voting, discussion groups)

(c) Informal
(Citizen weblogs, hacktivism)
Consultation is "a two-way relationship in which citizens provide feedback to government. It is based on the prior definition of the issue on which citizens' views are being sought and requires the provision of information. Governments define the issues for consultation, set the questions and manage the process, while citizens are invited to contribute their views and opinions"

Source: OECD, 2001, p. 23
Online engagement: Some examples

- Europa: EU Website at http://europa.eu.int/futurum/contrib_en.htm
- Scotland: E-petitions & online discussion forums
- UK Hansard Society: online consultations (e.g. TellParliament) at www.hansardsociety.org.uk
- Netherlands: Minister for e-Democracy online chat rooms
- E-Citizen Estonia: online consultation at http://tom.riik.ee
- Porto Alegre, Brazil: online citizen discussion
- Minnesota E-Democracy at http://www.e-democracy.org/
- Fujisawa, Japan: open forum
2. Challenges

Role of politicians

- Political conservatism
- Skill levels of political representatives
- “limited levels of 'policy learning' exist between representatives... (exacerbated by partisan competition, the part-time nature of local government representation, and time constraints)... should be addressed if successful and valuable online consultation... is to occur” (Chen 2002)
2. Challenges

Role of public service

- As subject-matter experts, educators, moderators and participants
- Managing citizens’ expectations and behaviours of participants
- Need for trusted facilitation
- Coordination between participants, departments and jurisdictions
- Accountability and responsibility
2. Challenges

Role of users
- Ensuring representation
- Civic deficit and lack of public information
- Skills and political literacies
- Digital exclusion
3. Towards a continuum of citizen engagement

- Current frameworks of online consultation are limited and relatively untested
- A holistic approach to e-democracy
- What is the vision of democracy driving technological development?
- Need for deliberative approach
3. Towards a continuum of citizen engagement

Deliberative methods “encourage citizens to scrutinise, discuss and weigh up competing values and policy options. Such methods encourage preference formation rather than simple preference assertion.”

Source: Coleman and Gøtze, 2002, pp. 6
3. Towards a continuum of citizen engagement

**Conditions for public deliberation:**
- Access to balanced information – Deliberative exercises are primarily concerned to discover what citizens think about issues once they have become reasonably informed about them.
- Agenda is open to revision or expansion by deliberating citizens.
- Time to consider issues expansively.
- Freedom from manipulation or coercion.

Source: Coleman and Gøtze, 2002, pp. 6-7
3. Towards a continuum of citizen engagement

**Conditions for public deliberation:**
- Rule-based framework for discussion
- Participation by an inclusive sample of citizens
- Scope for free interaction between participants
- Recognition of differences between participants, but rejection of status-based prejudice

Source: Coleman and Gøtze, 2002, pp. 6-7
Spectrum of participatory strategies

E-government information & services
One-way active and passive dissemination (on-demand) of government information and services. Includes civics and citizenship education.

Active participation
Ongoing participation of citizens. Includes formal and informal modes of participation (see (b) and (c) in Illustration 1) and consultation in partnership with government.

Online consultative process
Two-way consultation. e.g. public opinion surveys, comments on draft legislation.
Vertical and horizontal networks

(a) E-government
(Government info & services, civics & citizenship education)

(b) Participatory
(Online consultation)

(c) Informal
(Citizen weblogs, hacktivism)
Technologies for social inclusion

- Ensuring Internet access
- Developing technological and political literacies
  - Converting information into knowledge
  - Knowledge into political efficacy
- Using convergent technologies
- Lessons from e-learning and e-moderation
Conclusion

- Need foster the required technological skills and political literacies amongst representatives, constituents and the public service to effectively engage the development of policy.

- Explore how consultation can take place across both vertical and horizontal networks in which individuals, community groups and other stakeholders have an opportunity to deliberate and contribute to policy development and become involved in the ongoing development of democracy in Australia.
Thank you

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