Re-Engaging the Public through E-Consultation in the Government 2.0 Landscape

Shefali Virkar
University of Oxford, UK

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, there has been increased questioning of traditional democratic politics in Western liberal democracies, largely due to a decline in and a lack of opportunity for public participation in these processes. Such concerns are largely thought to be manifest in, amongst other phenomena, low voter turnout during elections: a trend particularly notice-able amongst young people where only half of those eligible to vote actually do so (Fagan et al., 2006). This is especially problematic for national governments, as it speaks of growing political apathy and a broader, more general disillusionment with current political institutions, actors, and practices.

Whilst it is impossible to comprehensively untangle *all* the reasons behind the decline in civic participation, there is little doubt that many citizens feel distanced from any sense of political relevance or power, often labouring under the impression that not only will their votes and individual voices be drowned out in the clamour of the crowd but also that the rules which govern their daily lives are drawn up by politicians and bureaucrats whom they will never meet and who are usually extremely difficult to contact (Eggers, 2005). The fundamental flaw lies in traditional decision-making practices which are, in their current form, often democratically inadequate as they fail to provide extensive and relatively equal opportunities for citizens, communities, and groups to contribute towards the shaping of decision-making agendas (Sclove, 1995).

BACKGROUND

The focus of discourse and scholarly activity, both in academic and policy circles, has thus gradually shifted away from a more centralised, top-down conception of 'government', those formal institutions and pro-cesses which operate at the level of the nation state to maintain public order and facilitate collective action, towards the notions of 'governance', an idea which, whilst traditionally synonymous for government has been captured in recent theoretical work as signifying 'a change in the meaning of government referring to a new process of governing; or a changed condition of ordered rule; or the new method by which society is governed' (Rhodes, 1996, p. 652).

Governance is thus seen to be ultimately concerned with crafting the *conditions* for ordered rule and col-lective action, or 'the creation of a structure or an order which cannot be externally imposed, but which is the result of the interaction of a multiplicity of govern-ing and each other influencing actors' (Kooiman & van Vliet, 1993, p. 64). It is thus a conceptual way of capturing shifts in the character of political rule that has been stretched to encompass a range of different transformations including an emphasis on drawing citi-zens and communities into the process of collaborative participation in political processes and the creation of new forms of governable subjects (Newman, 2005).

The idea of governance may therefore be said to comprise of two distinct but complementary elements: that of *government*, which encompasses all the formal institutional and legal structures of a country, and *de-mocracy*, which can be said to refer to the participative and deliberative processes which operate within those structures (Virkar, 2007). In this view, facilitating the involvement of different sections of society in the process of government is now seen as a democratic prerequisite in many advanced liberal democracies, with commentators such as Fishkin (1995) highlighting the need for 'mass deliberation', and emphasising the need for people and their representatives to be brought together to collaborate on issues of mutual interest.

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC: YOUNG CITIZENS, OLD PROBLEMS

Whilst early speculations on the Internet and democracy emphasised the potential for direct, unmediated debate and discussion and stressed the radically transformative nature of the process of public engagement (Margolis, 2007), this article follows the view of those who believe that whilst e-democracy in its purest sense may be altogether incompatible with a political culture of élitism (often unavoidable within the framework of a representative democracy), it is in practice sometimes neither feasible nor indeed desirable to replace what has evolved so far. Both theorists and practitioners talk of creating a civic commons in cyberspace (Blumler & Coleman, 2001) that would elicit and coordinate citizen comments and reactions to problems facing public institutions in order 'to create a link between e-government and e-democracy – to transcend the one-way model of service delivery and exploit for democratic purposes the feedback paths that are inherent to digital media' (Coleman & Gotz, 2001, p. 5).

In employing this method of conceptualising discussions surrounding e-democracy, this article will focus on *e-engagement*, which as a policy, if defined by an express intent to increase the participation of citizens in decision-making through the use of digital media would involve the institutionalised provision of resources and opportunities to facilitate responsible and collaborative decision-making of the sort that would result ultimately in institutional and social change. Further, its central thesis would aim to highlight areas of tension and synergy prevalent at the interface of e-democracy theory and practice and outline policy recommendations that would support the use of technology as a means of complementing and bolstering, rather than dramatically transforming along any particular ideological line, existing institutions and processes of representative democracy through the enhancement of communication and information flows between government and its citizens.

Simultaneous with the shift towards a more inclusive process of participation has been an increased interest in the new digital Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Historically, developments in communication technologies have resulted in changes in the way in which governments function, often challenging those in power to find new ways in which to communicate and interact with their citizens. In keeping with this trend, the recent exponential growth in access to new digital media in the developed world, and the expansion of a newly-created digital environment wherein people shop, talk, and otherwise spend large parts of their lives in online spaces, has opened up a plethora of new opportunities for interaction between power élites and the various constituent elements of civil society. At the same time, however, the rapid proliferation of these new technologies has raised important questions and triggered debates as to *who* is able to participate and to what extent they may do so, as well as dealing with the *types* of participation such technologies make possible at different levels of government and their impact on different government institutions and democratic processes.

E-CONSULTATION: TWO-WAY GOVERNANCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

A long-established way of engaging citizens in dialogue with policy makers is that of *Consultation*, a process whereby citizens are given the opportunity to provide feedback to government on matters of public importance and participate in the shaping of issues relevant to them (OECD, 2001). Whilst there is a need for dialogue at several different stages during the policy process, the process of consultation has traditionally involved discussion based around a pre-determined policy issue defined by the government during its initial formative stages, on which citizen's views and opinions are then sought (Rosen, 2001). The government also sets the questions and manages the process, often laying down the parameters within which the consultation is to take place, and only in rare cases are citizens are invited to suggest issues for discussion which they as private individuals might consider particularly important.

At the core of the consultative process lies the provision of information and the establishment and maintenance of channels of communication between government and its citizens. The use of ICTs in consultative processes is catching on as their potential for allowing policymakers to interact directly with the users of the services, to target the opinions of those at whom a policy is aimed, and to seek general citizen input on matters of national importance is gradually being recognised. The speed and immediacy of ICT

Related Content

Prediction System-Based Community Partition for Tuberculosis Outbreak Spread
Fatima-Zohra Younsiand Djamila Hamdadou (2022). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach (pp. 1-20).*
www.irma-international.org/article/prediction-system-based-community-partition-for-tuberculosis-outbreak-spread/289998

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Multi-Web Services in Load Balancing Cluster-Based Web Server
Abhijit Boraand Tulshi Bezboruah (2021). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Fifth Edition (pp. 1037-1050).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/evaluating-the-effectiveness-of-multi-web-services-in-load-balancing-cluster-based-web-server/260247

An Overview of Crowdsourcing
Eman Younis (2018). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Fourth Edition (pp. 8023-8035).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/an-overview-of-crowdsourcing/184498

Green Supply Chain Management in Malaysia Service Industry
Alia Nadhirah Ahmad Kamaland Yudi Fernando (2015). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Third Edition (pp. 5065-5073).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/green-supply-chain-management-in-malaysia-service-industry/112955

Understanding Retail Consumer Shopping Behaviour Using Rough Set Approach
Senthilnathan CR (2016). *International Journal of Rough Sets and Data Analysis (pp. 38-50).*
www.irma-international.org/article/understanding-retail-consumer-shopping-behaviour-using-rough-set-approach/156477