

Chapter 20

Citizen Consultation from Above and Below: The Australian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Citizen engagement and e-government initiatives in Australia remain somewhat underdeveloped, not least for a number of fundamental structural reasons. Fledgling initiatives can be divided into a number of broad categories, including top-down government consultation through blogs and similar experimental online sites operated by government departments; bottom-up NGO-driven watchdog initiatives such as GetUp!'s Project Democracy site, modelled on projects established in the UK; and a variety of more or less successful attempts by politicians (and their media handlers) to utilise social networking tools to connect with constituents while bypassing the mainstream media. This chapter explores these initiatives, and discusses the varying levels of success which they have found to date.

INTRODUCTION¹

In Australia, a range of state and Federal Government services have been provided online for some time, but attempts to achieve a more direct form of online consultation between citizen and governments, or even to establish a strong presence of politicians and parties online, remain relatively new. In part, this can be attributed to the comparatively slow take-up by Australians of advanced broadband services, which continue to be both slower and

more expensive than comparable services in other developed nations (Green & Bruns, 2007/2009). The 2007 federal election and its aftermath have created a new emphasis on online political information and e-government services, however. During the election itself, the conservative Coalition government, its successful Labor challengers, and several minor parties utilised popular social media sites such as *YouTube* and *Facebook* alongside their own party Websites to galvanise support and promote their policy platforms (Bruns, 2008). Further, the newly elected Labor government's restructure of relevant government departments to form the new Depart-

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ment of Broadband, Communication, and the Digital Economy (DBCDE) provided a clear indication of its policy intentions in this area; these have been underlined further by its 2009 announcement of an A\$43 billion nation-building project for the development of a fibre-to-the-home high-speed National Broadband Network (NBN).

Improved e-government services that aim to provide a better platform for citizen consultation are an obvious and necessary part of these developments. But governments confront a dilemma when implementing such services. Sluggish, inept, or half-hearted deployment of citizen consultation facilities leaves governments vulnerable to criticism from their constituents, and such criticism can be severely damaging to the public perception of governments if it reaches a large audience through viral transmission in online social media. In Australia, for example, it can be argued that the suboptimal utilisation of *YouTube* by the 2007 Coalition election campaign, and the user-generated material parodying it, further cemented the public image of then-Prime Minister John Howard as 'out of touch' (Bruns, Wilson, and Saunders, 2007). A speedy rollout of consultation facilities, by contrast, has the potential to generate more citizen participation than government staffers are able to engage with in a meaningful way, leading to similarly vocal criticism of citizen consultation projects as no more than PR exercises which have no real impact on policy decisions. Even a well-managed introduction of consultation facilities for example in specific areas of government responsibility may lead to disgruntled responses from users who would like to see their areas of interest treated as priorities.

Even when enthusiasm for e-government consultation is generally high among those most concerned with such initiatives, then, regardless of how that deployment is conducted, it is likely to disappoint a substantial section of that community because there is no clear consensus about how and where such consultation facilities should be deployed either at the citizen or at the

government level, and no clear understanding of the appropriate processes for such deployment exists in either group.

In the Australian context, this dilemma was evident during a recent trial of a government consultation blog by the DBCDE, which we discuss below. The problems experienced by this blogging trial point to fundamental, systemic limitations to the feasibility of a government-led deployment of citizen consultation facilities, especially where no clear understanding of how to utilise such facilities is shared between politicians, public servants, and citizens. An alternative to the top-down approach is the development of citizen consultation sites from the bottom up, by individuals and third-sector organisations: such sites provide in the first place a space for the formation of (ideally, non-partisan) communities of interest debating current policy challenges amongst themselves, with reference to the statements of relevant political actors; additionally, they offer an opportunity for the government of the day to tap into their collective knowledge and interest in policy development to draw out input for and responses to proposed policy initiatives. Australian political advocacy group GetUp!'s *Project Democracy*, which aims to generate debate on current political issues with reference to the parliamentary Hansard transcripts, provides a useful example for one such third-party space, and we examine it in a second case study below.² A third model builds on more individualised initiatives by political actors to engage with their constituencies through utilising social networking services, personal blogs, and similar online tools. Here, too, success and failure remain close companions, and the fate of such initiatives depends crucially on striking an appropriate balance between top-down information transmission and bottom-up receptivity to input from the citizenry. Those politicians who do use these services successfully for consultative purposes may be gesturing towards a new mode of political communication. This possibility is discussed in the third case study below.

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