Chapter 10
Evaluating the Use of Structured E-Forum Tools in Consultations on Public Policies

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ABSTRACT

The governments of many countries all over the world attempt to reform and improve their communication and interaction with citizens in important public policies issues through electronic channels mainly based on the Internet. It is therefore highly important to develop and systematically evaluate ICT tools that can facilitate and support high quality interaction and consultation among citizens and government agencies on public policies. This chapter investigates and evaluates the use of a structured e-forum tool, which has been designed and developed for this purpose, based on the Issue Based Information Systems (IBIS) framework. Using this tool an e-consultation pilot has been conducted on new legislation, which usually constitutes the most important, complex, and extensively debated component of every public policy. It has been evaluated using multiple methods: analysis of the discussion tree, quantitative evaluation through a structured questionnaire, and qualitative evaluation through an in-depth discussion in a small focus group. The conclusions of them were consolidated revealing the advantages offered by the structured e-forum, and also its limitations.

INTRODUCTION

The governments of many countries all over the world attempt to reform and improve their communication and interaction with citizens on public policies issues through electronic channels, mainly based on the Internet. The rapid development and diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICT), and especially the Internet, which offer new cheap, inclusive and interactive channels and environments for public political communication and interaction, and at the same time the observed 'democratic deficits' and the trend to overcome them through more participation and involvement of citizens, have been the main drivers of the rapid development of e-participation in the last decade (Macintosh, Malina, & Whyte, 2002; OECD, 2003a, 2003b and 2004; Saebo, Rose, & Flak, 2008; Davis, 2009). According to the relevant reports of OECD (2003b and 2004) electronic participation (or e-participation) is defined as the extension and transformation of participation in societal democratic and consultative processes mediated by ICT. Its main objective is to exploit the continuously increasing capabilities and penetration of ICT in order to inform citizens on government activities and policies, and to broaden and deepen political participation, increasing both its quantity and quality. The potential of ICT and especially the Internet in this direction has been strongly emphasized by the relevant literature. OECD (2004) argues that 'The unprecedented degree of interactivity offered by new ICTs has the potential to expand the scope, breadth and depth of government consultations with citizens and other key stakeholders during policy-making'. In the same direction recently Todd Davis (2009) states that 'Imagine technology and democracy uniting to overcome distance and time, bringing participation, deliberation, and choice to citizens at the time and place of their choosing'. These new technologies can drive significant transformations in the quantity and quality of communication and interaction of government agencies with citizens.

This will enable government agencies to gain a better and deeper understanding of the problems, needs, concerns and values of the groups of citizens and in general the societies they are serving, and therefore make in-time the required adaptations and reforms in their public policies, programs, operations and legislations whenever conditions change. Therefore e-participation has the potential to be a strong driver of innovation and reform in government.

It should be emphasized that these e-participation ideas have been based on the ideas of 'strong' or 'participatory' democracy that had emerged about 20 years ago and keep evolving. Their basic proposition is that the role of citizens in modern democracy cannot be limited to voting in the elections taking place every three or five years, but should also include their deliberative engagement in public decision-making; they argue that the informed opinion of citizens should be taken seriously into account in all the decisions of government organizations. Barber (1984) highlights the concept of 'strong democracy', which is based on active citizen participation and discussion among opposing views, which however 'entails listening no less than speaking, it is affective as well as cognitive...'. Held (1987 and 1996) distinguishes nine different models of democracy, one of them being the 'participatory' model, which reflects the need to engage both citizens and civil society organisations (CSOs) in the policy process, which however necessitates informed and active citizens. Fishkin (1991 and 1995) calls for "mass" deliberation by citizens instead of "elite" deliberation by their elected representatives, and argues that 'A major part of the problem of democratic reform is how to promote mass deliberation – how to bring people into the process under conditions where they can be engaged to think seriously and fully about public issues'. The development, reduction of prices and rapid penetration of ICT, and especially the Internet, provided effective means for the wide application of these ideas.

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