Chapter IX
Online Policy Consultation:
A Case Study of Local Government

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INTRODUCTION

As developments in communication technologies impact upon many spheres of public and private life, they influence the way in which the public sector engages citizens. While most governments have an online presence, this is mainly applied to the provision of one-way (i.e. government to citizen) information and services. However, available technologies such as the Internet and mobile telephony provide opportunities for governments to enter into a two-way dialogue with citizens, increase transparency of their operations, and encourage democratic participation outside election time. As the government closest to the people, local government is particularly well placed to use online technologies to enhance and expand participatory democracy through strategies such as e-consultation.

The implementation of an e-consultation strategy by local government presents a number of challenges to local governments seeking to enhance their dialogue with constituents using information and communication technologies (ICTs). This chapter draws from an external evaluation of an Australian local government initiative, Darebin eForum.[1] Conducted in 2007, this evaluation included a survey of e-consultation participants[2] and interviews with Council Officers responsible for moderating the site.[3] The findings provide a snapshot of some of these challenges.[4] Though modest in size and ambition, the experiences of Darebin eForum provide valuable insight into the challenges faced by governments seeking to use ICTs to engage in dialogue with their constituents.

E-Consultation

E-consultation is seen as a valuable channel through which a two-way relationship can be developed and enhanced between citizens and elected representatives. It involves the use of ICTs such as the Internet, interactive broadcasting, and digital telephony, to extend and/or enhance political democracy through access to information, and to facilitate participation in democratic communities, processes, and institutions (Balnaves, Walsh & Shoesmith, 2006; Hacker & van Dijk, 2000; Walsh, 2006).

Governments typically use consultation to develop a two-way relationship with citizens by inviting them to provide feedback on a specified issue. Governments typically set the questions, provide related information and manage the process (OECD, 2001). The OECD defines consultation as:

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. (2001 p. 23)

E-consultancy combines the electronic delivery of government services with:

the direct use of new technologies to provide members of the public with access to the decision-making process. This type of programmatic behavior, electronic consultation, or participation can be seen as a direct means by which elements of the public service and executive can engage directly with the community or relevant stakeholders to develop policy. (Chen, Gibson & Geiselhart, 2006 p. 101)

One type of e-consultation, online consultation, uses the Internet to enable citizens to provide feedback to government based on information and issues defined and facilitated by government (OECD, 2003). Governments may draw from a variety of electronic media to conduct e-consultation, such as online forums, surveys, feedback forms, and polls, electronic voting, webinars and podcasts (Bailey, 2007). Distinguished from the "push-down" delivery of government information and services, online consultation uses the Internet to enable interactive communication (Hacker & van Dijk, 2000 p. 40). This dialogue can take place vertically between elected representatives, public servants, and the public or horizontally between members of the public and/or civil society representatives and stakeholders. Governments may draw from a variety of electronic media to conduct e-consultation, ranging from informal engagements, such as non-binding discussions facilitated online and "electronic suggestion boxes," to more structured and formal activities, such as online collaboration and report development, structured online discussion forums, surveys, feedback forms, and polls, electronic voting, webinars, podcasts, planning simulations and games (Bailey, 2007; Chen et al., 2006 p. 101).

Drawing from a case study, this chapter will focus on how e-consultation has been adopted and adapted at the level of local government in Australia. The experience of the Darebin eForum provides some interesting insights into the development and implementation of online consultation. The following examination of online policy consultation is divided into five parts: following a brief overview of Darebin eForum (http://eforum.darebin.vic.gov.au), some of the ways in which e-consultation challenges the roles of the public service, elected representatives, and citizens are identified. Following this, the author identifies the need to situate e-consultation within a continuum of citizen engagement that is essentially ongoing, deliberative, educative, and inclusive.

Darebin eForum

Launched in March 2006, the rationale of the Darebin eForum was to provide an additional mechanism for councillors in local government to consult members of their constituency "and make local politics a more meaningful part of people's lives" (Merkes, 2004). Specific aims of the online forum included: the extension of pathways to democratic discussion, consultation, and decision-making by citizens, councillors, and council officers in a local government area; the offer of greater government transparency and accountability; the facilitation of easy access to

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