EMERGING ECONOMIES TRANSITION

Promise and Problems of E-Democracy

CHALLENGES OF ONLINE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

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Promise and Problems of E-Democracy: Challenges of Online Citizen Engagement

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Foreword

This book examines the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in engaging citizens in policy-making in OECD member countries. Building on the results of an initial survey, published in Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-making *(OECD, 2001), a set of country case studies on current and emerging practice in the use of ICTs for citizen engagement were collected in 2002. The book draws heavily upon the insights, contributions and guidance of national experts from OECD member countries participating in the Expert Group on Government Relations with Citizens and Civil Society. It also represents a contribution to the OECD E-Government Project, under whose auspices the work was conducted.*

The book includes an executive summary highlighting the main policy lessons for using ICTs to provide information, opportunities for consultation and public participation in policy-making. It suggests 10 guiding principles for successful online consultation and identifies five key challenges for online citizen engagement in policy-making. This is followed by a major comparative review of current practice by Professor Ann Macintosh (International Teledemocracy Centre, Napier University, UK) including numerous examples from 12 OECD member countries (Australia, Canada, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Slovak Republic, Sweden, UK) as well as the European Commission. The book concludes with an analysis of the future of democracy and the Internet by Professor Stephen Coleman (Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, UK).

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Executive summary

Today, all OECD member countries recognise new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to be powerful tools for enhancing citizen engagement in public policy-making. Despite the limited experience to date, some initial lessons for online citizen engagement in policy-making are emerging:

- **Technology is an enabler not the solution.** Integration with traditional, "offline" tools for access to information, consultation and public participation in policy-making is needed to make the most of ICTs.
- **The online provision of information is an essential precondition** for engagement, but quantity does not mean quality. Active promotion and competent moderation are key to effective online consultations.
- The **barriers** to greater online citizen engagement in policy-making **are cultural, organisational and constitutional not technological.** Overcoming these challenges will require greater efforts to raise awareness and capacity both within governments and among citizens.

This book highlights policy lessons from current experience in OECD member countries and suggests 10 guiding principles for successful online consultation. It builds on the results of an initial survey of OECD member countries published in *Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Pariticipation in Policy-making* (OECD, 2001) and a set of country case studies collected in 2002. It does not deal with online service delivery nor with ICT applications to elections (*e.g.* e-voting) although some of the issues discussed here, such as providing information online, may be relevant for both. Finally, it identifies five key challenges for online citizen engagement in policy-making.

What lessons can we learn from current practice in online engagement?

Engaging citizens in policy-making is a sound investment in the design and delivery of better public policies and a core element of good governance. Many OECD member countries have begun to experiment with a range of ICTs to enable greater citizen involvement in policy-making and initial experience illustrates the opportunities, dynamics and limits of these new tools. Most OECD governments are working to bridge the "digital divide", and recognise

Box 1. **Guiding principles for successful online consultation**

1. Start planning early

Start planning an online consultation exercise early on. Define what information should be provided to the target group, and in what format. Decide how long the online consultation should be run, who will be responsible for it and how the input received will feed into existing timetables for decision-making.

2. Demonstrate commitment

Ensure leadership and visible commitment to the online consultation at the highest level and communicate this clearly from the outset. Explain the purpose of the consultation (*e.g.* scoping new policy issues, developing draft legislation, evaluating policy implementation), where the results will be published and how they will be used.

3. Guarantee personal data protection

Guarantees for the protection of personal data must be provided for participants in online consultations. The implications for personal data protection will vary with the form of data collection chosen (*e.g.* anonymous submissions, online registration or password access for restricted groups).

4. Tailor your approach to fit your target group

Identify the participants whose opinions are being sought (*e.g.* general public, experts, youth) and adapt the online consultation to their capacities and expectations (*e.g.* language, terminology). Provide additional support to enable participants with special needs (*e.g.* physical disabilities, social exclusion) to participate.

5. Integrate online consultation with traditional methods

Consider the use of traditional methods in association with online consultations (*e.g.* public roundtables plus dedicated websites). An approach based on multiple channels is likely to be more successful in reaching and engaging citizens than reliance upon a single medium.

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Box 1. **Guiding principles for successful online consultation** *(cont.)*

6. Test and adapt your tools

Before launching an online consultation exercise, ensure that the tools chosen (*e.g.* software, questionnaires) have undergone pilot testing. Adapt the tools on the basis of feedback from participants and identify promising information and communication technologies (ICTs) for future consultations (*e.g.* mobile phone messaging).

7. Promote your online consultation

Invest adequate effort and resources to ensure that potential participants are aware that an online consultation will be launched and know how to take part (*e.g.* press conferences, advertising, links to websites, emails). Identify external partners who could help raise awareness and facilitate participation (*e.g.* NGOs, business associations).

8. Analyse the results

Ensure that sufficient time, resources and expertise are available to provide thorough analysis of the input received in the course of the online consultation. The use of closed or multiple choice questions will allow for automatic processing, while free text replies will require a far greater investment in human resources. Such considerations should be taken into account from the outset when designing the online consultation.

9. Provide feedback

Publish the results of the online consultation as soon as possible and inform participants of the next steps in the policy-making process. Ensure that participants are informed of how the results were used in reaching decisions.

10. Evaluate the consultation process and its impacts

Process evaluation aims to identify the main problems encountered, whether the consultation reached the target group and the level of participant satisfaction. Evaluating the impact of consultation requires an estimation of whether participants' input had an identifiable impact on the content of the final policy decision. Evaluation results should be communicated widely and may, in turn, prompt fruitful public debate on the benefits and drawbacks of online consultation.

the need to ensure that all citizens, whether online or not, continue to enjoy equal rights of participation in the public sphere.

However, their current emphasis on extending direct individual access (through the provision of hardware and public access points) risks overshadowing the importance of public/private partnerships (such as with NGOs and business associations) to multiply points of access and provide valuable support to citizens in using these new technologies. While many believe ICTs have great potential, today they remain complementary to traditional tools for public consultation.

ICTs can enable greater citizen engagement in policy-making…

A review of OECD member countries' experience reveals three key factors for consideration when seeking to use ICTs for online citizen engagement, namely: **Timing**, **Tailoring** and **Integration**.

Timing: Most examples of online engagement are to be found at the **agenda-setting stage** of the policy cycle. This is not surprising given that this is early enough in the process to be most open to suggestions from citizens and is characterised by a significant degree of public deliberation – which new ICT tools are designed to facilitate. It may also indicate the exploratory or experimental nature of these online initiatives, given that this is a stage where online engagement will be most likely to complement, rather than replace, traditional methods for policy-making. A few countries have developed online tools suitable for use at all stages of the policy cycle, others have undertaken online engagement at a specific stage (*e.g.* policy formulation or monitoring). Whether the lack of examples of online engagement during the implementation and evaluation stages of policy-making indicates that they are inherently less amenable to the use of new ICTs, or simply less widespread at this time, remains an open question.

Tailoring: A **wide range of public bodies** are now exploring the use of new ICTs to engage citizens in policy-making: from local governments, to national governments and parliaments as well as those operating at the intergovernmental or international level (*e.g.* the European Commission). Clearly, the objectives and scope of the online engagement efforts undertaken by these bodies differ considerably (*e.g.* for local urban planning or national education policy). The target groups addressed also vary accordingly, and may include all citizens (*e.g.* within a given geographic area), all interested parties

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(*i.e.* independently of location) or specific sub-sections of the population (*e.g.* marginalised groups, entrepreneurs, youth).

Integration: Experience to date highlights the importance of ensuring the **integration** of online and traditional methods for citizen engagement in policy-making. Both in terms of providing information on the policy issue or the online engagement exercise itself (*e.g.* through posters, printed brochures, local press) and when providing a range of options through which citizens may provide feedback (*e.g.* post, telephone, fax as well as email or co-ordinated traditional and online discussion forums). The active **promotion** of online consultation exercises (*e.g.* through leaflets, stickers, website advertising banners) is also necessary. ICTs can also be used to collect and analyse unsolicited comments and complaints, which contain valuable information for policy-makers (*e.g.* on problems with policy implementation). The specific technologies chosen for online engagement vary in their degree of sophistication – most examples feature a dedicated website with email options. Others adopt specialised software to manage online deliberation in a discussion forum or use password-protected discussion areas for registered users. Ensuring competent and constructive **moderation** of online deliberations is also a crucial factor for success.

But raise new questions for government…

While new information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer significant opportunities for greater citizen engagement in policy-making, they also raise a host of new questions for government. For example: How are citizens' rights of access to information to be ensured in the online era? What aspects of government's current structure, organisation, resource allocations and available skills need to change to respond to new standards in their interactions with citizens? What is the status of civil servants' online responses to citizens' queries or their submissions to an electronic discussion forum? Only a few OECD member countries have begun to address such issues (*e.g.* by developing a code of conduct for civil servants, or official guidelines on answering citizens' emails).

Box 2. **Tools for online engagement at each stage of policy-making**

Stage in policy-making cycle	Information	Consultation	Participation
Agenda-setting	• Site-specific search engines • E-mail alerts for new policy issues • Translation support for several languages • Style checkers to remove jargon	• Online surveys and opinion polls • Discussion forums • Monitoring emails • Bulletin boards • Frequently asked questions (FAQs)	• E-communities • E-petitions • E-referenda
Analysis	• Translation support for ethnic languages • Style checkers to remove jargon	• Evidence-managed facilities • Expert profiling	• Electronic citizen juries • E-communities
Formulation	• Advanced style checking to help interpret technical and legal terms	• Discussion forums • Online citizen juries • E-community tools	• E-petitions • E-referenda amending legislation
Implementation	• Natural language style checkers • E-mail newsletters	• Discussion forums • Online citizen juries • E-community tools	• E-mail distribution lists for target groups
Monitoring	• Online feedback • Online publication of annual reports	• Online surveys and opinion polls • Discussion forums • Monitoring emails • Bulletin boards • Frequently asked questions (FAQs)	• E-petitions • E-referenda

Source: See Macintosh A. "Using information and communication technologies to enhance citizen engagement in the policy process" (this volume).

How can ICTs enhance online engagement?

The effective engagement of citizens by governments rests on their recognition of access to information as a basic precondition, consultation as central to policy-making and public participation as a relationship based on partnership. The new tools offered by ICTs can offer assistance in each of these domains. Their impact can also be greatly enhanced through use in combination with traditional, "offline" methods.

Ensuring greater accessibility of more information…

The Internet is the medium of choice for all OECD member countries when providing citizens with an unprecedented degree of access to

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government information. ICTs offer powerful tools for searching, selecting, and integrating the vast amounts of information held by the public administration as well as presenting the results in a form that can be readily used by individual citizens.

For citizens seeking information online, the distinction between **access** and **accessibility** is a real issue. Even when citizens do have access to ICTs, searching for a specific piece of government information online is rarely a simple or straightforward exercise. Designing better public information online must start from the perspective of the end-users of government information and requires an assessment of their needs, capacity to find, digest and use relevant information. Enhancing the accessibility of online information can be achieved by: providing online information in terms of specific life events or policy issues; search engines; software for style checking and improving the intelligibility of government texts; multilingual translations of official documents; provision of online glossaries.

As any user of online information may testify, **quantity** does not mean **quality**. While all OECD member countries provide an increasing amount of government information online, the quality of the information available varies considerably in terms of its accessibility, relevance and utility to citizens wishing to be informed of, or participate in, policy-making. Faced with an increasing information overload, the role of trusted "information mediators" (whether within, or independent of, government) capable of identifying, aggregating and explaining relevant information on specific policy issues of concern to citizens is likely to grow.

Harnessing the interactivity of ICTs for online consultation…

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. At the same time, such new tools pose significant challenges to governments in terms of their technical, political and constitutional implications. Among the questions raised are: How can government ensure an equal hearing and "assured listening" to so many individual voices? How will such inputs be integrated into the policy-making cycle? How can guarantees for personal data protection be ensured? What is the role of traditional mediators of public voice (such as elected representatives) and new proponents of citizens' concerns (such as civil society organisations or CSOs)?

A number of **tools** are available to governments intent on collecting citizens' views and suggestions on issues proposed for online consultation, including: government consultation portals or websites; email lists; online

discussion forums; online mediation systems to support deliberation; ICT support in conducting traditional "face-to-face" consultations.

In the interests of transparency and accountability, governments also need to develop ICT tools for the **analysis** of public input and to **provide feedback** to citizens on how their comments and suggestions have been used in reaching decisions on public policy.

As is true for traditional consultations, the earlier an online consultation is planned in the policy cycle the better its chances of success. Online consultation also faces some specific challenges, such as its in-built self-selection of those participants who already have access to new ICTs – thereby raising the risk of over-representation of a small cross-section of the population. However, such risks can be reduced by serious efforts to enable wider access (through public kiosks, cyber-cafes and community centres, as well as via digital TV and other platforms) and an adequate investment in promoting and supporting online consultations by governments and their partners from civil society.

Exploring online public participation…

Only a very few OECD countries have begun to experiment with online tools and discussion formats which leave citizens wide latitude in proposing opportunities for participation, setting the agenda for discussion, submitting their own proposals and shaping the final outcomes.

Among the options for online public participation currently being explored in some OECD member countries are the use of electronic discussion groups for the deliberation and development of policy options; e-petitions (to government or parliament); and online referenda. While many of the barriers to such innovative forms of online engagement may be technical, others are more closely related to cultural resistance to new forms of partnership with citizens and civil society in policy-making and constitutional factors shaping the traditional policy process within representative democracies

What are the main challenges for online engagement?

Online citizen engagement in policy-making is new and examples of good practice are scarce. Hence the imperative for building on the experience of others and the need for further comparative work on this emerging issue. National governments should take advantage of the innovations being introduced at the local level, in parliaments and in other countries. Of course, any approach to online engagement that proves successful in a given context must be adapted to the culture, traditions and objectives of other government units who might seek to replicate this experience. On the basis of OECD

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Box 3. **Issues for the evaluation of online engagement**

Evaluation Issue	How to address the issue
Was the e-consultation process conducted in line with best practice?	• Ask stakeholders if they are satisfied with the process. • Assess whether adequate resources are in place to conduct the consultation. • Check whether process followed best practice guidelines. • Assess whether the choice of an online tool was appropriate for the consultation.
Were the consultation objectives and what was expected of the citizens made clear?	• Ask stakeholders if they understand what is being asked. • Assess whether the participants' contributions are appropriate.
Did the consultation reach the target audience?	• Assess the adequacy of the promotion of the e-consultation. • Identify who and where potential participants are, in terms of demographic and geographic characteristics.
Was the information provided appropriate and relevant?	• Assess how easily the participants can access the information. • Assess whether the participants' contributions were informed by it.
Were the contributions informed and appropriate?	• Assess to what extent the contributions address the consultation issue. • Assess how easily the participants can access contributions from others. • Classify contributions according to whether they provide information, ask questions or make suggestions. • Assess to what depth contributions respond to other contributions.
Was feedback provided both during and after the consultation?	• Assess whether questions are answered by government during the consultation. • Assess the extent to which the government feedback relates to the contributions.
Was there an impact on policy content?	• Check to what extent a change of policy is possible given the stage in the decision-making the consultation occurred. • Assess to what extent contributions are reflected in the revised or newly formulated policy.

Source: See Macintosh A."Using information and communication technologies to enhance citizen engagement in the policy process", (this volume).

member countries' experience to date, five main challenges for the future of online engagement of citizens in policy-making may be identified:

1. **Scale**

   From a citizen's perspective how can technology enable an individual's voice to be heard and not be lost in the mass debate? There is a need for policy measures and technologies to promote and maintain virtual public spaces that enable an individual's voice to develop into a community (public) voice. From a government perspective, there is the challenge of how to listen, and respond appropriately to each individual contribution. Fostering online communities and developing ICT tools to support such communities could enable a more collective approach.

2. **Capacity**
   The second challenge is how to provide citizens with greater information on public issues and to enhance their capacity for listening to, and engaging in, argument and counter argument. At the same time, greater efforts are needed to raise awareness and capacity among government officials with regard to the opportunities and limits of new channels for citizen engagement in policy-making offered by ICTs. Accessible and understandable information and the opportunity to engage in debate, enabled by such tools as next generation mediated discussion forums, are basic preconditions. Closely connected issues are those of bridging the digital divide and the involvement of traditionally disenfranchised groups in policy-making (*e.g.* those subject to social exclusion, youth). The challenge is to develop tools for online engagement that provide citizens with an opportunity both to participate in, and to understand, collective decision-making and to develop the skills for active citizenship.
3. **Coherence**
   Governments need to take a holistic view of the policy-making cycle and design technology to support the processes of informing, consulting, participating, analysing, providing feedback and evaluating. Inputs received at each stage in the policy-making cycle must be made available appropriately at the other stages of the process. This will lead to better quality policies that are more likely to be successfully implemented and better informed citizens. Consideration should be given to addressing if, and to what extent, knowledge management techniques could support the policy-making cycle.
4. **Evaluation**
   As governments increasingly support the development of ICTs to enable citizen engagement on policy-related matters, there is a corresponding need to know whether online engagement meets both citizens' and governments' objectives. Evaluation tools to assess what value-added online engagement has, or has not, brought to policy-making must be developed. The benefits and impacts of applying technology in opening up the policy process to wider public input have yet to be evaluated and articulated.
5. **Commitment**
   Engaging citizens online raises legitimate expectations that public input will be used to inform policy-making. Governments need to adapt their structures and processes to ensure that the results of online consultations are analysed, disseminated and used. This commitment must be communicated widely, demonstrated in practice and validated regularly (*e.g.* via annual reports, audits, parliamentary reviews).

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PART I

Using Information and Communication Technologies to Enhance Citizen Engagement in the Policy Process

by
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This report considers how, and to what extent, ICTs are being used to facilitate the provision of information and to support consultation and active participation of citizens to enable better policy-making. Numerous case studies from OECD member countries present specific government applications. These describe not only successes but also, importantly, the issues and constraints. Increasing engagement should, on the one hand, enable better policy but, on the other hand, it will increase the resources and time needed to construct policy. The report highlights 5 main challenges for e-engagement, those of: scale; building capacity and active citizenship; ensuring coherence; evaluating e-engagement; and ensuring commitment. Given the expanding knowledge base of e-engagement practice and the emergence of government policy, there is every indication that the use of ICTs to engage citizens will increase. This report makes an important start in developing a methodological framework that addresses how ICT can be designed and used to effectively and efficiently support information provision, consultation and participation in policy-making.

* Thanks are due to members of the International Teledemocracy Centre (ITC) research team at Napier University (UK) for their input, support and suggestions in preparing this report.

Overview

This paper considers if, how, and to what extent information and communication technologies (ITCs) can achieve enhanced citizen engagement in the policy-making process. However, it does not seek to provide answers or conclusions – rather it raises salient questions and provides a useful framework in which to find answers.

It is impossible to report on electronic engagement of citizens without discussing democratic engagement in general; technology is only an enabler, facilitating existing, or in some cases, new methods of engagement. As such this work draws on the OECD report *Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-making (OECD, 2001)*. E-engagement is a term used to refer to the use of information and communication technologies (ITCs) in supporting information, consultation and participation.

In designing e-engagement systems is important to enlist the input of stakeholders who represent a cross section of the target audience. Much research has been conducted on how to conduct citizen consultations and some OECD member countries have been developing best practice guidelines for this. These should be taken as a basis for e-engagement design. Frameworks that support the acceptance of e-engagement systems need to be developed in order to overcome the organisational and cultural barriers associated with introducing new ways of working. Given the diverse range of stakeholders and the complex nature of governance, it is necessary to look beyond the usual organisational and cultural barriers and place specific emphasis on the issues of privacy and trust.

The report highlights 5 main challenges for e-engagement.

1. The first is **the challenge of scale**. From a citizen's perspective how can technology enable an individual's voice to be heard and not be lost in the mass debate? One approach is to design technology to support an individual to actively participate by giving him or her the electronic means to find others that share a similar point of view. There is a need for technology and supporting measures to enable virtual public spaces such that an individual's voice develops into a community (public) voice. From a government perspective, there is the challenge of how to listen to and respond to each individual. Fostering online communities and developing e-engagement

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tools to support such communities could enable a more collective approach. There is a need to map perceptions related to e-engagement in a cross-section of communities in OECD member countries and to establish requirements for the design of community-based e-engagement tools on the basis of the different needs of different types of communities.

2. The second challenge is **how to build capacity and active citizenship** by harnessing ICTs to constructively encourage deliberation by citizens on public issues – listening to, and engaging in, argument and counter arguments. This indicates a requirement for accessible and understandable information and the opportunity to debate enabled by tools such as next generation mediated discussion forums. Connected to this challenge is the involvement of otherwise disenfranchised young people in policy making. Studies of young peoples' attitudes to political practice have shown widespread disregard for conventional politics, but also widespread dissatisfaction with their lack of involvement. The challenge is to develop e-engagement tools that provide young people with an opportunity both to participate in and to understand collective decision-making and active citizenship.
3. The third challenge is that of **ensuring coherence**, allowing governments to take a holistic view of the policy-making life cycle. New information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be used to support the processes of informing, consulting, participating, analysing, providing feedback and evaluating. There is a need to ensure that the knowledge input at each stage in the policy-making life-cycle is made available appropriately at other stages of the process so as to enable policy to be better formulated and citizens better informed. Consideration should be given to addressing if, and to what, extent knowledge management techniques could support policy-making.
4. The fourth challenge is about **evaluating e-engagement** and making sense of what has, or has not, been achieved. There is a need to understand how to assess the benefits and the impacts of applying technology to the policy process. As governments increasingly support the development of ICTs to enable citizen engagement on policy-related matters there is correspondingly an increasing need to appreciate whether such electronic engagement meets citizens' and governments' objectives. But how do we undertake the evaluation and what do we evaluate?
5. Last, but not least, the fifth challenge is that of **ensuring commitment** at all levels. Governments need to adapt structures and decision-making processes to ensure that the results of online consultations are analysed, disseminated and used. This commitment must be communicated widely, demonstrated in practice and validated regularly. Building commitment and capacity can benefit from the experience of local governments, parliaments and other countries.

Experience in the field of online citizen engagement in policy-making is rare, hence the need for all governments to build on the experience of others. To take advantage of innovative e-engagement work underway at the local level, in parliaments and other countries there is a need to know and understand what is happening elsewhere. Some OECD member countries have already undertaken a number of surveys in this area. It is important to consolidate this work and clearly characterise the technology used, the stage in the process at which it is used and the potential benefits it offers.

This report represents a contribution to such efforts and presents a range of country case studies from OECD member countries. An analytical framework for the comparative analysis of e-engagement is suggested for future reference. However, we also note that any e-engagement system must be adapted to the culture and traditions of each OECD country. So we can expect to see much diversity in how this framework is used and how guiding principles derived from it are applied in practice.

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Introduction

The potential impact of new information and communication technologies (ITCs) on efforts to enhance citizen engagement in the policy process is now widely recognised. This report builds upon the initial review of policy and practice in OECD member countries provided in the OECD report *Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-making* (2001). It was undertaken under the framework of the OECD E-Government Project which regards e-Government as having the potential to be a major enabler in the adoption of good governance practices. Finally, the report has benefited from guidance provided by the OECD Expert Group on Government Relations with Citizens and Civil Society, whose members also contributed numerous country case studies.

The report sets out to:

- Develop a conceptual approach for analysis of the issue, while taking account of the differing contexts in OECD member countries.
- Identify key themes and issues while prioritising them.
- Analyse the issues, with a focus on identifying potential and existing solutions and approaches.
- Identify priority areas and issues for future analysis.
- Identify key information sources, as well as current gaps and approaches to address these.

The paper considers if, how, and to what extent ICTs can help to achieve enhanced citizen engagement in the policy-making process. It sets out to sketch a framework to:

- Form a basis for further dialogue with OECD member countries, experts and the public at large.
- Indicate areas for further research and analysis.
- Act as input into the analysis of issues by the OECD E-Government Project.
- Provide concrete examples of good practice in e-consultation provided by the OECD Expert Group on Government Relations with Citizens and Civil Society.

The overall objective of this report on engaging citizens in policy-making is to consider how new ITCs can be used to reinforce representative democracy. The wider issues raised by public consultation in policy-making (for example the changing relations between parliament, government, citizens and civil society organisations) are beyond the scope of the present report. It is, however, impossible to discuss and report on electronic engagement of citizens without discussing democratic engagement in its entirety. After all **technology is only an enabler**, facilitating existing, or in some cases, new methods of engagement. As argued by Wilhelm (2000), social and political problems cannot easily be solved by merely introducing technology into the process.

In line with the view that responsible citizens are capable of discussing and generating policy options independently and can play a positive role in decision-making, the OECD report on *Citizens as Partners* (2001) suggests that while final decisions must still rest with government, importance should be attached to the "equal standing for citizens in setting the agenda, proposing policy options and shaping the policy dialogue." Active participation is regarded by the OECD (OECD, 2001: 12) as: "a relation based on partnership with government, in which citizens actively engage in defining the process and content of policy-making". Realising the potential of active participation, in turn, requires an investment in developing active citizenship.

The report is structured so as to frame future work. Following this introductory chapter the report is divided into three main sections.

Section A "Information, Consultation and Participation", comprising sections 1 to 6, addresses the overall theme of design, use and evaluation of e-engagement tools. It discusses the objectives for undertaking electronic engagement of citizens by governments. Having highlighted the aims and objectives of e-engagement it is then able to build on these objectives and examine how the design of technology can facilitate citizen engagement. Engagement, as used here, comprises information, consultation and participation, therefore sections 4 through 6 examine the technology to support these three actions. Increasing engagement on the one hand should enable better policy but, on the other hand, will increase the resources and time needed to construct policy.

Section B "Constraints and Challenges" comprises sections 7 to 12 and considers the challenges currently facing e-engagement. It focuses on the issues surrounding the digital divide and argues the need for active citizenship education. The use of ICT to engage young people is highlighted as an opportunity to motivate this age group to participate in the policy formulation. Section 9 discusses how ICTs might support the analysis of consultations and addresses the important issue of feedback. Without timely

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and appropriate feedback from government on how citizens' contributions have been dealt with there is the danger of "consultation fatigue". Section 10 looks at how to evaluate e-engagement. It addresses the issues of why we should evaluate e-engagement and what should be evaluated in the e-engagement process. It considers how to undertake evaluation and offers a potential approach to electronic engagement evaluation, bearing in mind the current lack of a comprehensive framework to evaluate citizen engagement in policy-making whether "online" or "offline". There is also the question of "evaluation from whose perspective" *i.e.* that of government or that of citizens? The section reviews general criteria for evaluating participation, and briefly outlines common methodologies that policy makers are likely to consider relevant to the evaluation of electronic engagement. The overarching question is "How effective are ICTs in engaging a wide audience and enhancing deliberation so as to inform and influence the policy process". Finally, this section identifies five main challenges to e-engagement. These require urgent attention, in terms of further discussion and collaborative research, by all OECD member countries in order that governments are in a better position to meet them.

Section C "Lessons from Experience in OECD member countries" reviews current experience with e-engagement and section 13 describes ten case studies taken from OECD member countries and the European Commission. It highlights the importance of comparative analysis aimed at learning from the experience of others, and starts to build an analytical framework for future discussion and research.

The report concludes with Annex 1 providing a list of commonly used terms in e-engagement, Annex 2 outlining nine innovative R&D projects funded by the European Commission underway in several OECD member countries. Finally a comprehensive bibliography is provided.

Throughout the report concrete examples of online engagement undertaken by OECD member countries are used to illustrate specific issues, and appear as boxed entries in each section.

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Promise and Problems of E-Democracy:
Challenges of Online Citizen Engagement
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A. Information, Consultation and Participation

1. Background

Over the last decade there has been a growing awareness of the need to develop new tools for public engagement that enable a wider audience to contribute to the policy debate and where contributions themselves are both broader and deeper. A number of commentators have addressed this issue and at the same time highlighted the possible dangers of a technology-driven approach.

Barber (1984) highlights the concept of strong democracy, creating active citizen participation where none had existed before. However he goes on to warn that the use of technology could diminish the sense of face-to-face confrontation and increase the dangers of elite manipulation. Held (1996) distinguishes nine different models of democracy. His participatory model reflects the need to engage both citizens and civil society organisations (CSOs) in the policy process. However, in order to engage citizens in policy-making, he and others recognise **the need for informed and active citizens.** Fishkin (1995) argues the need for "mass" deliberation by citizens instead of "elite" deliberation by elected representatives. Instant reactions to telephone surveys and television call-ins do not allow time to think through issues and hear the competing arguments. Fishkin states (1995:41):

> *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.*

Van Dijk (2000) addresses the role of information and communication technology with such participatory models of democracy in order to inform and activate the citizenry. However he warns of the consequences of poorly designed technology (van Dijk, 2000, p.44)

> *Computerized information campaigns and mass public information systems have to be designed and supported in such a way that they help to narrow the gap between the "information rich" and "information poor" otherwise the spontaneous development of ICT will widen it.*

Several commentators discuss the broader use of technology to support the democratic process. Coleman and Gøtze (2001) outline four possible scenarios for technology supporting democracy. The first e-democracy model is where the technology supports direct democracy. For example, Becker and

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Slaton (2000) explore the current state and future of e-democracy initiatives that are designed specifically to move towards direct democracy.

The second model is based on online communities, where technology is concerned with supporting civic communities. The work of Rheingold (2000) on virtual communities assesses the potential impact of civic networks, questioning the relationship between virtual communities and the revitalisation of democracy. Tsagarousianou *et al.* (1998), give descriptions of a number of projects involved with e-democracy and civic networking.

Coleman and Gøtze's third e-democracy model concerns the use of online techniques to gauge public opinion through surveys and opinion polls. However, Fishkin (1995) questions whether opinion polls contribute to the complex issues of public policy. He argues that as far as American citizens are concerned they have the opportunity to be consulted on several occasions by opinion polls without prior warning or preparation, in order to find their views, even when the individual may have had no reason to develop any opinion on the subject being asked. He concludes that all that was gathered was an "attitude" created on the spot by the very process of participating in the survey.

Finally, their fourth model focuses on the use of technology to engage citizens in policy deliberation, emphasising the deliberative element within democracy. Fishkin sets out some general conditions for deliberation (Fishkin, 1995, p. 142) concluding that deliberation requires:

> *Conditions that reknit the citizenry to the political process: that encourage thoughtful discussion, mutual respect, active participation and an openness of the process to all groups and strata. We must create public spaces that effectively motivate citizens to become a "public" where realisation of these values is possible.*

Coleman and Gøtze build on these requirements (Coleman and Gøtze, 2001, p. 6) and define deliberative engagement as:

> *Methods of public engagement can be described as deliberative when they encourage citizens to scrutinize, discuss and weigh up competing values and policy options. Such methods encourage preference formation rather than simple preference assertion.*

Increasingly, OECD member and non-member country governments around the world are committed to facilitating wider public participation in policy-making. Typically they are addressing issues such as how to provide easier and wider access to government information and how to ensure that citizens have the ability to give their views on a range of policy related matters. This **top-down perspective** of democracy is characterised in terms of user access to information and reaction to government led initiatives. Dutton (1999) focuses on technology to support access to politics and services with

the citizen as the user. Sclove argues that this top-down approach alone is inadequate for strengthening democracy (Sclove, 1995, p. 39), stating:

> *Numerous political theorists agree that decision-making processes are democratically inadequate, even spurious, unless they are combined with relatively equal and extensive opportunities for citizens, communities, and groups to help shape decision-making agendas.*

From the **bottom-up perspective,** citizens are emerging as producers, rather than just consumers, of policy (Macintosh *et al.,* 2002). Recognising that there is a need to allow citizens to influence and participate in policy formulation, technology is emerging to support this. However, most citizens have not been involved typically in pre-policy planning. Instead of reacting to an agenda set by government, this bottom-up perspective allows CSOs and citizens to set the agenda.

The OECD report, *Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-making* (2001), discusses the government-citizen relationship in policy-making and argues that the bringing together of the top-down and bottom-up approaches can enable a strong partnership leading to a strengthening of representative democracy. The document defines three types of interaction, namely one-way information provision, a two-way consultation relationship where citizens are given the opportunity to give feedback on issues and, lastly, active participation – a relationship based on partnership where citizens are actively engaged in the policy-making process. The report highlights 10 guiding principles for successful information, consultation and participation in the policy-making life cycle (OECD, 2001, p. 75).

It is evident from the report that OECD member countries are committed to facilitating broader and deeper public participation. They are providing easier access to public consultation documents and are ensuring that citizens and civil society organisations have the ability to give their views on a range of policy related issues. Also, some countries support the notion of citizens being joint initiators of policy, engaging the citizens to contribute to the formation of policy. While all governments expressed high expectations for the use of ICTs in this domain, the OECD report emphasises the importance of integrating these new tools with existing, traditional tools for engaging citizens given the continuing presence of a "digital divide" within all OECD member countries.

One traditional embodiment of the two-way relationship where citizens are given the opportunity to give feedback on issues is through written consultation. Much research has been conducted on how to conduct written consultations and some OECD member countries have been developing best practice guidelines. As many of the guidelines are of a general nature they can, and should, be taken as a basis for e-consultation. Much of this work has focussed on the traditional paper-based consultation on draft policy

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documents where the consultation has been with known experts and targeted groups. Written consultation can be considered the classic form of consultation, even though now documents are increasingly read in electronic format rather than print. This switching to electronic document handling is perhaps facilitating dissemination but will not necessarily in itself materially affect the breadth and depth of public participation. Placing consultation documents on the Web allows those who comment on a draft policy to be self-selecting.

The Report of the Government Commission on Swedish Democracy (2000) looks **beyond traditional consultation mechanisms** and emphasises the need to increase citizens' participation and influence on the development of society in the 21st century. With regard to technology it states:

> *IT can also be used to reinforce civil society and to promote participative democracy. The new information technology has the potential to broaden opportunities for citizens to participate in and influence problem formulations and discussion before decisions are made by elected assemblies. National and local policy should in the first instance be directed at developing techniques and methods for such participative democracy with the support of IT.*

In November 2001 the UK government published a report on "Better Policy-Making" (CPMS, 2001) based on a survey of senior policy-makers in the UK. This looked at the barriers and enablers and identified where the policy-making process needs to change to enable policy-makers to move into the 21st century. It states that **modern policy-making** should contain the following nine features: be forward looking, be outward looking, be innovative, flexible and creative, ensure decisions are based on the best available evidence (*i.e.* be evidence-based), be inclusive, be joined up, ensure policy is constantly reviewed, enable systematic evaluation, and learn from experience.

Enacting democratic principles, building the enabling infrastructures, and engaging citizens in political decision-making is expected to lead to more active citizenship and good governance, and has resulted in a large number of democracy pilot studies on information dissemination, consultation and participation in policy-making. The OECD report *Citizens as Partners, Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-making* (2001) documents a number of these initiatives and details specific case studies in some of OECD member countries.

There are also a growing number of examples of government organisations innovatively using ICTs, and in particular the Internet, to provide access to policy information and request public comments on it. These examples demonstrate how technology is emerging as a tool not just to disseminate information but also to provide people with the capacity to participate and influence decision-making. The report "Online Consultation in GOL Countries" (Poland, 2001), which is a joint product of the members of the

Government Online International Network, provides a good description of the current state of using technology to inform and engage citizens.

In July 2002 the UK government issued a consultation paper on a policy for electronic democracy (HM Government, 2002). This consultation document usefully argues that **e-democracy** can be divided into two distinct areas – one addressing **e-engagement** and the other addressing **e-voting**. In the case of the former, the document sets out the possibilities for greater opportunity for consultation and dialogue between government and citizens.

Given the expanding knowledge base of e-engagement practice and the emergence of government e-engagement policy, there is every indication that the use of ICT to engage citizens will increase. However there is, at present, no methodological framework that specifically addresses how ICT can be designed and used to efficiently and effectively support information provision, consultation and participation in the policy-making life cycle. Based on the input and deliberations of the OECD member countries participating in the OECD Expert Group on Government Relations with Citizens and Civil Society, this report seeks to contribute to the development of such a framework.

2. Objectives of e-engagement

The OECD report *Citizens as Partners* (2001) argues that democratic political participation must involve the means to be informed, the mechanisms to take part in the decision-making and the ability to contribute and influence the policy agenda. Specifically it usefully defines the following terms (OECD, 2001, p. 23).

- **Information**: a one-way relation in which government produces and delivers information for use by citizens. It covers both "passive" access to information upon demand by citizens and "active" measures by government to disseminate information to citizens.

Government → **Citizens**

- **Consultation**: a two-way relation in which citizens provide feedback to government. It is based on the prior definition by government of the issue on which citizens' views are being sought and requires the provision of information.

Government ⇌ **Citizens**

- **Active participation**: a relation based on partnership with government, in which citizens actively engage in the policy-making process. It acknowledges a role for citizens in proposing policy options and shaping the policy dialogue – although the responsibility for the final decision or policy formulation rests with government.

Government ⟷ **Citizens**

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ICTs have the potential to support the development of e-engagement applications that address these joint perspectives of informing, consulting and participating. A growing number of publications reflect the growing maturity of electronic democracy as a field of research and practice (*e.g.* Hague and Loader, 2000; CACM, 2001).

One can consider three over-arching reasons for better engagement of citizens in the policy-making process:

- To produce better quality policy.
- To build trust and gain acceptance of policy.
- To share responsibility for policy-making.

Other reasons include, but are not limited to, the ability to visualize policy, to give citizens the means to supervise government and policy implementation, to balance the power of lobby organisations, to avoid corruption, to foster active citizenship, all with the long term objective of strengthening representative democracy.

Given these overarching reasons, the objective of technology-enabled information dissemination, consultation and participation is to improve the policy-making process through a range of devices designed to enable:

- **Reaching and engaging with a wider audience** through a range of consultation and participation technologies adapted to cater for the diverse technical and communicative skills of citizens thereby enabling broader participation.
- **Providing relevant information** in a format that is both more accessible and more understandable to the target audience to enable more informed participation.
- **Enabling more in-depth consultation** and supporting deliberative debate online.
- **Facilitating the analysis of contributions** to support policy-makers and to improve policy.
- **Providing relevant and appropriate feedback** to citizens to ensure openness and transparency in the policy-making process.
- **Monitoring and evaluating** the process to ensure continuous improvement.

Additional benefits include the possibility to build **seamless government,** to facilitate information storage and retrieval, and to enhance the attractiveness of a debate for certain audiences.

It is also necessary to determine where in the policy-making process technology-enabled information dissemination, consultation and

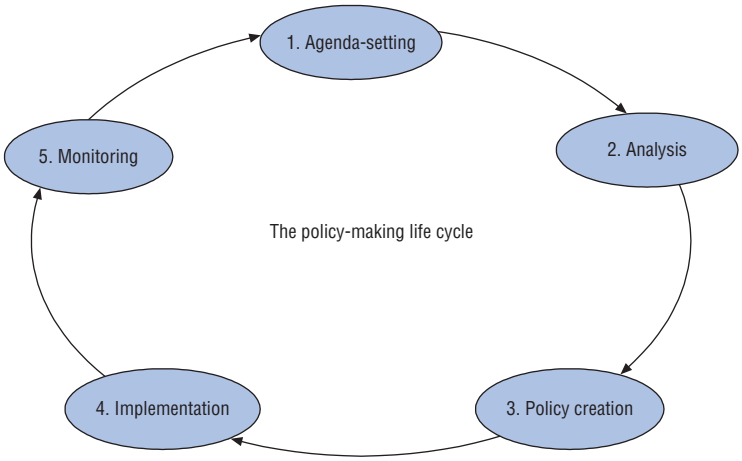
participation can be effective. The OECD report *Citizens as Partners* (OECD, 2001, p. 41) states that:

> "*Citizens can make an active and original contribution to policy-making when their relationship with government is founded on the principle of partnership. Active participation represents a new frontier in government-citizen relations for all OECD countries and different countries use different terms … it requires governments to share in agenda-setting and requires commitment from government that policy proposals generated jointly will be taken into account in reaching a final decision.*"

The policy-making process can be considered as a cycle of activities which include preparation, implementation and evaluation and where results are fed back into agenda-setting and policy design. The report provides a table indicating information, consultation and participation in the policy cycle (OECD, 2001, p. 22).

In order to establish a framework for discussing where ICT is most appropriate in the policy process, and to ensure that all readers are using the same terminology, the following **five stages for policy-making** are suggested (see Figure 1). These are based on discussions with representatives from the UK Cabinet Office and the Office of the E-Envoy. Clearly, there will be differences across the OECD member countries, with countries using different terminology and possibly not including all the stages in their current policy-process, but by defining these stages and with these provisos, it will be possible for countries to jointly discuss the design and appropriateness of technology throughout the policy-making process and so share experiences.

Figure 1. **The policy life cycle**



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These stages will act as a baseline for developing a framework for e-engagement in the later sections of this report. It is the intention to look at each of them and determine how information, consultation and participation can be supported at each stage through the use of appropriate technology. Each country, of course, has the possibility to develop a more detailed set of stages for their specific policy-making process.

1. **Agenda setting:** establishing the need for a policy or a change in policy and defining what the problem to be addressed is. This may arise as the result of a change of government; a sudden change in the environment; a growing development; a new problem or a continuing problem. Information, consultation and participation are all important for this stage. In particular active participation allows citizens the opportunity to determine possible agenda items.
2. **Analysis:** defining the challenges and opportunities associated with an agenda item more clearly in order to produce a draft policy document. This can include: gathering evidence and knowledge from a range of sources including citizens and civil society organisations; understanding the context, including the political context for the agenda item; developing a range of options (including doing nothing) and conducting cost benefit analysis for each one and providing advice to Ministers who take a decision on which option to pursue. Again, information, consultation and participation are all important for this stage. Active participation allows citizens to determine the range of options under review.
3. **Creating the policy:** ensuring a good workable policy document. This involves a variety of mechanisms which can include: formal consultation, risk analysis, undertaking pilot studies, and designing the implementation plan. Ministers take decisions. At this stage information and consultation are important but there is possibly limited scope for active participation.
4. **Implementing the policy:** this can involve the development of legislation, regulations, guidance, and a delivery plan. At this stage information and consultation are important but there is also scope for active participation (*e.g.* in the delivery of public goods and services by civil society organisations).
5. **Monitoring the policy:** this can involve evaluation and review of the policy in action, research evidence, views of users and horizon scanning. Information, consultation and participation are all important for this stage. Active participation allows citizens the opportunity to give their views on the policy in action and to suggest changes.

At this point the process can loop back into stage 1, as the policy may be modified on the basis of experience with implementation.

OECD guiding principle number 4 with regard to the issue of time in the policy life cycle, states (OECD, 2001, p. 15):

> *Public consultation and active participation should be undertaken as early in the policy process as possible to allow a greater range of policy solution to emerge and to raise the chances of successful implementation. Adequate time must be available for consultation and participation to be effective. Information is needed at all stages of the policy cycle.*

Currently, the UK government generally initiates consultation with "experts" that is academics, delivery staff, businesses and other NGOs at stages 1 and 2. At stage 3 this consultation is broadened out to include citizens. Stage 5 has traditionally been handled through formal evaluation of the policy and the use of management information.

Each of the above policy-making stages has the potential to be strengthened by the use of ICTs to better disseminate information leading to a more informed citizenry, to enable better consultation helping to secure broader and more informed contributions, and to support better participation facilitating the emergence and articulation of bottom-up ideas influencing policy formulation and agenda-setting. We will return to this framework and develop it further based on issues of the appropriateness of technology discussed in the following sections.

Some OECD member countries have developed guidelines for online consultations, for example, Canada and the Netherlands (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations of the Netherlands, 1998). However it is not obvious from these guidelines how the contributions from the citizens will be integrated into the government process of policy-making. It is unclear what, if any, mechanisms are in place to ensure that contributions are incorporated appropriately and that such contributions actually have an effect on the policy content. Indeed many reports on e-democracy (for example, Coleman and Gøtze, 2001) report on pilots at national and local level of government. However the majority of these reports only focus on specific aspects of engagement in the policy-making process, that is, the **"front-end"** aspects where information is disseminated and where comments are sought. The corresponding **"back-end"** processes, that is, where the input from citizens has to be analysed, integrated into policy and feedback provided to those who contributed, have less weight placed on them or are not discussed at all.

Most commentators focus on the ability of governments to improve the dissemination of information to citizens using technology and are silent as to how technology could support the better production of information in the first place. Others focus on how technology can better gather contributions from citizens but typically overlook how technology could support the analysis and feedback of comments to citizens. ICTs need to be designed to support the

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whole of the policy-making life cycle, both the front-end processes involving the engagement of citizens and the back-end processes involving the integration of citizens' contributions into policy. This holistic view of technology-enabled policy-making will be re-visited in the following sections.

Box 2.1. **European Commission – Interactive Policy-making**

On 3 April 2001 the European Commission adopted a communication on Interactive Policy Making [IPM – C(2001)1014], which aims to improve governance by using the Internet for collecting and analysing reactions in the marketplace for use in the European Union's policy-making process. This initiative will be used by 26 Commission services to evaluate existing EU policies and for open consultations on new initiatives. Interactive Policy Making forms part of the "e-Commission" initiative and is linked to the Commission's governance and the better regulation initiatives. All this is part of an effort to improve the way in which the Union is run. The Commission thinks that better accepted policy decisions will result if they can achieve a better participation of stakeholders in preparing these decisions. To that end they need user-friendly systems. To build relevant and effective policies, they need views from the market place – from businesses and from citizens. They need to know what people think about their new policy ideas. They need reactions to the proposals which they have already put into place. The Internet is helping them to gather these views. It also helps them to do this transparently, in other words so that everybody can see the results. The IPM initiative will help the Commission, as a modern public administration, to respond more quickly and accurately to the demands of citizens, consumers and business with a view to making EU policy-making more transparent, comprehensive and effective.

See: *www.ipmmarket.homestead.com*

3. Design of e-engagement systems

This section considers the issues and constraints that have to be taken into account when designing ICT based tools to enable citizen engagement in the policy process. We specifically focus on the general design issues for e-engagement systems. We consider who the "users" are and how, if possible, to involve these users in the design of the systems themselves.

Because we are considering the use of technology to support democratic practice, design has to be considered from the two perspectives of "technology" and "democracy". We take as our starting point in the design of e-engagement systems relevant existing guidelines on best practice. From the democratic perspective we use existing guidelines for citizen engagement and

from the technology perspective we use software best practice for participatory user design.

By considering the objectives of technology-enabled information dissemination, consultation and participation as discussed in the last section we can begin to draw up some guiding principles that are relevant to all electronic engagement systems. Design aspects that are specific to the separate components are discussed in the following sections on technology to support information, consultation and participation.

Reaching and engaging with a wide and diverse audience highlights the importance of designing systems that provide the widest possible accessibility and ease of use. Accessibility, usability and security are widely considered to be critical issues in the design of systems and services for the general public. The contentious nature of governance means that, in the design of e-engagement systems, these issues can become more complex. Democratic needs for openness and transparency may conflict with needs for ease of use and simplicity of access. The issues of unequal access to technology and the unequal technical capabilities of citizens demand systems that are simple to use. Similarly the demand for transparency may call for procedures to be streamlined and simplified. However when procedures are questioned or fail, demands can be made for explanations of why procedures are as they are, and their wider legitimacy may be called into question.

For e-Government, trust refers to **trust in both government and the technology.** Establishing trust demands both that government can establish that those who seek access to information, and decision-making have a legitimate right to do so, and that the privacy and civil rights of those who are governed are not compromised in doing so. This issue of trust in government is a significant area for research (see for example CACM 2000). The experience of electronic commerce has emphasised contractual trust, and focused on technological issues like security and authentication. Trust is an important resource in the e-commerce environment and shared knowledge of the rules, which shape its generation, maintenance, and impacts are critical to the success of e-commerce transactions. This is equally true for governments, if not more so. However, in addition representations of trust, trustingness and trustworthiness which take a more socially-orientated approach are required for government initiated e-engagement systems.

The following design issues and trade-offs need to be explored:

- Balancing the need for straightforward, anonymous access to systems, with the need to collect personal data for various reasons such as authentication and evaluation.
- Balancing the needs for standard, generic interface features with the need to reflect the expectations of a variety of target audiences.

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- How to support easy and flexible navigation through complex policy issues.
- Deciding how much information should be provided to assist individuals to be adequately informed on issues and so have the competences to contribute.
- Finally, balancing rights of access, protection of privacy and security with issues of transparency, accountability and trust.

One clear guiding principle from the democracy perspective is the need to state objectives clearly. The OECD guiding principle number 3 on "clarity" states (OECD, 2001, p. 15):

> *Objectives for, and limits to, information, consultation and active participation during policy-making should be well-defined from the outset. The respective roles and responsibilities of citizens (in providing input) and government (for making decision for which they are accountable) must be clear to all.*

The e-consultation guidelines published by the Netherlands government advises that it should "be made particularly clear in advance what is expected of the participating citizen and within what scope he is to operate" (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations of the Netherlands, 1998).

Having clear objectives helps to **identify and scope the target audience.** There is a need to understand who the audience is, what their communicative and technical skills are likely to be, and importantly, what will motivate them to become engaged in the policy-making process. Assuming all citizens to be the target audience immediately causes difficulties because of the diverse nature of such a large audience. Designers suggest that audiences be narrowed down as far as possible in order that the "look and feel" of the e-engagement system can be matched to the cultural attitudes of the audience. E-engagement systems for young people are more likely to attract them if the design meets the goals and expectations of that age group. In order to achieve an acceptable system it is important to involve a cross-section of the target audience in the design of the system as early as possible.

The typically diverse nature of the target audience has technical implications as far as accessibility is concerned. At this point in time most Internet-based engagement pilots have had to be designed to reflect the lowest denominator of requirements. It is important that the e-engagement system can be used by people using any Internet enabled computer at minimum connection rates and with any browsers. To achieve this, the majority of current e-engagement pilots are designed to be predominantly text based with a few light graphics. The use of video, audio or animation techniques has to be carefully thought through because of the above reasons.

Usability and clear navigation for Internet-based systems are important aspects of design. Powazek (2001) argues that clear navigation is

one way to help achieve a user's trust in the system. For Internet-based systems, accessibility and usability features for partially sighted users and blind users need to be addressed. For example, all images should given tags so that a textual description of their function will be available in their place for people accessing the site with a screen reader. Given the increased access and use of the Internet these issues will become more important. This is discussed in detail and recommendations have been made by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C, 2002) through their Web Accessibility initiative.

In the US, specific legislation (Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act) requires any electronic information developed, procured, maintained, or used by the federal government to be accessible to people with disabilities. All electronic information created or acquired by any federal agency or department must also comply with these accessibility standards.

Control mechanisms, such as user registration and issuing user IDs and passwords need to be considered. However the extent to which they are required can be gauged by asking the questions such as: "Are the results of the engagement action legally binding to government or rather informing Ministers on the issue?", "Is the information of a confidential nature and therefore can only be made available to a restricted audience?"

For online consultation and participation through discussion forums clear **engagement guidelines** need to be issued. These should contain a Privacy Policy, a statement on whether Anonymous Comments are allowed and Conditions of Use. The important need for moderation and making rules clear from the start is stressed in Coleman and Gøtze (2001, p. 17).

An example of a condition of use statement is:

"*We reserve the right to delete comments that may, in our view, be considered libellous. Users wishing to make comments on the consultation document are requested to refrain from using offensive or abusive language, to refrain from including advertising statements or including text of a disruptive nature. Users should be aware that any such comments may be removed. Inclusion of any statement or comment in this site does not indicate that consultation sponsors endorse it or take any responsibility for it.*"

E-engagement systems are relatively new therefore one can expect the design of such systems to evolve over time. To support on-going improvement in these systems it is imperative that the design of the system include an opportunity for users to comment on the appropriateness of the user interface, content and functionality of the system. One way of achieving this

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is to include an online questionnaire or assessment form for users to complete. Questions such as the following could be included:

> "*Generally, what do you think of the public using electronic tools to participate in democracy?*
>
> *A good idea*
>
> *A poor idea*
>
> *Are there any other comments you would like to make…*"

Also the importance of **integrating the use of e-engagement with traditional off-line tools** should be stressed and both should be mutually reinforcing. One concrete way to start to achieve this is to ensure that each promotes the other for any specific consultation exercise.

Box 3.1. **UK – House of Commmons Information Committee Recommendations**

In their July 2002 report entitled *Digital Technology: Working for Parliament and Public*, the UK House of Commons Information Committee (2002) made a number of recommendations on the conduct of consultations. These are summarised below:

- The purpose and terms of the consultation should be made clear at the outset, both to those initiating the consultation and those participating in it.
- It must be made clear to participants that they are not being asked to make policy but to inform the thinking of legislators.
- Efforts need to be made to recruit participants, whether individuals or organisations, who can impart experience and expertise.
- Special efforts are needed to make online consultations socially inclusive: these may include training in the necessary ICT skills and directions to public Internet access for participants.
- Contributions to consultations need to be interpreted or summarised by an independent body or staff.
- A good consultation exercise will bring value to both the decision makers and the consultees. This can be tested through effective evaluation procedures, which should be built into each consultation proposal.
- Participants should receive feedback on the outcomes of the consultations.

See: *www.parliament.uk/commons*

Promote your online consultation

Promoting e-engagement is an important issue. We need to find new ways to promote online information, consultation and participation to

citizens. One of the objectives of e-consultation is to reach a wider audience, and not just the organisations and individuals that usually respond to consultations. To achieve this objective the methods for promoting the online consultation have to be broader than for traditional consultation exercises. A comprehensive publicity plan needs to be drawn up and followed right from the start of the e-engagement exercise. This plan could include:

- A high profile launch of the e-consultation, remembering to include the Web address in any press release.
- Availability of Internet connected PCs at related events for citizens to make contributions along with demonstrations on how to use/contribute to the e-consultation.
- Web links from stakeholders and government websites.
- Invitations to politicians to actively contribute online [see Box 3.2].
- Paper postcards promoting the site and inviting comments.
- "Tell a friend" type e-postcards.
- Clickable banner ads on the websites most visited by the target audience should be considered and allowed for in the e-consultation budget.

In conclusion, among the lessons learnt from previously reported e-engagement studies is to enlist the support of stakeholders who represent a cross section of the target audience when designing the systems. E-engagement is not radically different from traditional citizen engagement, therefore it is important to build on both best practice for consultation and best practice for designing systems for a diverse audience.

Box 3.2. **The Netherlands – Promoting e-consultation on a National Strategy for Sustainable Development**

The objective was to formulate a national strategy for sustainable development as input for the Dutch delegation to the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg (26 August-4 September 2002). The aim was to shape the decision-making process, an exercise conducted for the Ministry of General Affairs. Citizens were invited to contribute to the debate by giving their opinion via the Internet. The debate was extended by two weeks, during which time several leading politicians proposed statements so as to encourage more people to participate in the discussion.

See: *www.nsdo.nl*

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4. Information online

Information: is a one-way relationship in which government produces and delivers information for use by citizens. It covers both "passive" access to information upon demand by citizens and "active" measures by government to disseminate information to citizens. (OECD, 2001, p. 3)

OECD guiding principle number 5 on "objectivity" states (OECD, 2001, p. 15):

Information provided by government during policy-making should be objective, complete and accessible. All citizens should have equal treatment when excercising their rights of access to information and participation.

One of the objectives of technology-enabled information dissemination is to provide relevant information in a format that is both more accessible and more understandable to the target audience to enable more informed participation and acceptance of policy. These two aspects of **accessibility** and **understandability** will be addressed in this section.

As reported elsewhere many governments are providing Web portals for citizens to gain access to information. It is also worth noting that parliaments in many OECD member countries are also providing extensive websites for citizens. We will not address the issue of how these government and parliament websites should or should not be linked, but leave readers to contemplate this question.

One example of a parliament providing extensive information via the Web is the Scottish Parliament's website. This site is at *www.scottish.parliament.uk* (consulted February 2002). It publishes the Official Report of the Parliament's meetings in the Chamber by 7 a.m. on the following day, and Committee Reports as soon as possible and generally within 3 days of the meeting. In addition, and as a further step towards openness, committee agendas and papers are published in advance where possible. The site also shows the email addresses of all MSPs, their biographies and links to personal Web pages, alongside phone and fax numbers and correspondence addresses. Email addresses for clerks to committees and for offices within the Parliament are also published. A webcasting service broadcasts Chamber and Committee meetings live across the Web so that organisations and individuals can listen in and watch items of particular importance to them. The service also includes access to the audio-visual archive of webcasts, and relevant papers for the committee meetings.

It is also worth noting that in the US, the "Congress online" project has considered how the various websites on Capital Hill should be organised and a report has been published (see *www.congressonlineproject.org* consulted February 2002). It discusses the critical elements for building and maintaining effective congressional websites and provides the results of their evaluation.

Access to information

Access to information is the cornerstone on which citizen engagement rests and requires both legislation and clear government mechanisms for its enactment. There is a need to reconcile the citizens' right to know with the individual's right for privacy and the need to preserve confidentiality, where disclosure of information would be against the pubic interest. Once these issues are addressed, how can technology support access to information?

The Government Online report (Poland 2001, p. 9) on electronic consultation distinguishes between the terms access and accessibility.

- **Access** means the real possibility of consulting or acquiring government information electronically.
- **Accessibility** means the ease with which one can actually make use of the possibility of consulting government information electronically.

The report recognises seven characterises that determine the degree of accessibility which are very relevant here. They are:

1. **Recognisability and localisability:** the public must know what information is available from which government body, and how and where this can be located.
2. **Availability:** the information must be stored in a standard digital form and be accessible through an electronic medium or data carrier.
3. **Manageability:** the public must not drown in the quantity or complexity of the information but instead be able to find their own way through the system, if necessary using search systems provided by the government.
4. **Affordability:** the price of the information should not create any barriers, this being dependent on the importance of the information for society at large.
5. **Reliability:** the public must be able to rely on the correctness, completeness and authenticity of the information.
6. **Clarity:** the information must be as clear as possible in terms of content, context and presentation.
7. **Special needs:** the information should preferably also be accessible to the blind, the visually handicapped and people with other handicaps.

These characteristics usefully focus on access in terms of the appropriate form of the information and its appropriate location given the diverse nature of the potential audience. Citizens may wish to access information over the Internet using number of devices and from a range of locations. These include public access points in libraries and community cyber cafes, kiosks, schools and also access from the workplace and the home.

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As noted above, it is not necessarily easy for citizens to know where relevant information is located. Search engines can facilitate this but these typically result in long lists of, often, irrelevant information. The development of government portals is helping to address this problem to some extent. Some government sites, for example *www.ukonline.gov* (consulted February 2002), arrange the information around life events (*e.g.* going to university, finding a job).

Box 4.1. **The Netherlands – Amsterdam mail**

Amsterdam Mail is a free information service that lets you receive information updates by email on municipal items that are of interest to you. It is an initiative of the Project bureau "Op weg naar de Glazen Stad" (Towards the Glass City), and is available to anyone who has access to the Internet and email. If you register with Amsterdam Mail you will receive regular emails with references to information published at municipal websites. References are prepared on the basis of your personal profile in which you can indicate the items you wish to be informed about. You can choose from a host of items and use street names and postcodes. You can also indicate that you do not wish to receive information on certain items. You can change your profile at any time. The emails that you receive from Amsterdam Mail will also tell you if there are any new items you may receive information about. The associated website enables you to register for Amsterdam Mail, change your profile, and search the Amsterdam Mail archives.

See: *www.amsterdammail.nl*

Box 4.2. **Sweden – Älvsjö and Norrmalm: searching for information**

Älvsjö and Norrmalm, both boroughs within the City of Stockholm, have sophisticated search tools available on their websites. Citizens are able to search all formal documents relating to the District Committees' activities, for example, searching for "elderly care" will find all official documents including investigations, minutes, agendas, etc where issues concerning this topic were discussed or otherwise handled. There is also a subscription tool by which citizens can subscribe to agendas and minutes. A proposal can also be tracked from the point it enters the administration until some decision is made; how civil servants work with the proposal, what suggestions they make, what the Committee decides, and what happens after that, if anything. This is arranged by use of a technical tool called Insight (*Insyn*).

See: *www.alvsjo.stockholm.se*

Box 4.3. **Mexico – E-Government for information, consultation and participation**

One of the government's priorities is to put IT at the centre of government innovation. The ultimate objective being to change the role of IT, from that of a simple management tool, to that of a powerful platform in strategic planning and the administration of knowledge. In addition to providing better services and optimising public procurement, e-Government will:

Produce better information about government.

Enable citizen participation and consultation in a permanent way.

Allow citizen evaluation of government services.

The development of e-Government in Mexico requires an enormous effort. It is necessary not only to design systems, but also to provide training to government employees, expand public access points and offer citizens the opportunity to acquire computer skills.

Box 4.4. **Slovakia – Access to information online**

In November 2001, the Slovak government decided to give access to all information and documents, that are processed, marked up and approved by the Slovak government for all the citizens of Slovakia and also for the Third sector (NGOs) on the official government website. This means that every citizen and non-governmental sector can be informed, and as a result, take action to make their views known during the preparation of the documents, which will contribute to building of the democratic state of law and guarantees full transparency. The system is operating and is fully implemented, so that every citizen can reach all the documents that are on the agenda of the Slovak government concerning legislative rules.

Understanding information

Due to the expected diversity of users, the aim should be, wherever possible, for text to be written clearly and simply with the avoidance of jargon and legalistic terms. In addition, governments in several OECD member countries must respond to legal obligations to publish information in all official languages. Even in the absence of such legal requirements, many governments provide information in the languages of important ethnic minorities. How can technology support this?

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Support for such efforts may emerge from advances in research on Natural Language Processing (NLP). Work on multi-lingual access and style checking, which can be considered *language-oriented* research and development, has begun to address the problems related to understandability. Such NLP tools can be used to check the style of documents according to standard readability measures and to mark up important and difficult expressions. Two specific types of support are discussed here, namely **support for style checking** and **support for language translation**. (An example of NLP technology being used in public administration can be found in the Eden project, described in Annex 2 of this report.

Style

Style checking of a document identifies "strange" words and expressions. One way of achieving this is to link legalistic and technical expressions to an online help menu or glossary. In this way, the user can navigate through the information and decide which words he or she needs an explanation for. Early experiments in this field came from applied research in psycho-linguistics. Here the focus was on readability and comprehensibility. For a good review of these studies see Lehner (1993). To check the style of writing many different techniques have been developed which process documents in order to recognise some mathematical features of the text. These techniques are generally referred to as *readability* or *comprehensibility* formulae. Although this kind of text processing does not ensure, from a theoretical point of view, a reliable evaluation of text, readability formulae have been successfully applied to several domains in order to ensure clarity and ease of reading of public information. Current research in this field is generally referred to as *controlled writing*. These techniques are being applied to many different domains, such as technical documentation and legal documentation, *i.e.* domains where it is crucial to ensure broad and easy comprehension of the content of a document. In many cases, readability evaluation techniques are associated with static resources such as **guidelines** or **glossaries,** and can be used as optional tools by the writer.

Multi-lingual translation

Multi-lingual translation is important when information is to be disseminated and read by all citizens in countries with more than one official language or coming from different ethnic backgrounds. However the field of automatic translation is recognised as a difficult research area. The UNL project (see *www.vai.dia.fi.upm.es/ing/projects/unl/index.htm* consulted February, 2002) is an important current research project in this area. The website describes the project:

> *UNL (Universal Networking Language) is a language that – with its companion "enconverter" and "deconverter" software – enables communication among*

people with differing native languages. It will reside, as a plug-in for popular World Wide Web browsers, on the Internet, and will be compatible with standard network servers. The technology will be shared among the member states of the United Nations. Any person with access to the Internet will be able to "enconvert" text from any native language of a member state into UNL. Just as easily, any UNL text can be "deconverted" from UNL into native languages.

Popular examples of translation systems are typically simple "assistants" using online support such as thesauruses and dictionaries. They tend to be relatively simple systems and because of this have difficulty dealing with ambiguous or complex terms.

Whether assisted by new ICTs, or simply as the result of careful drafting, the overarching aim is to ensure that citizens have access to relevant, complete, timely and understandable information on the basis of which they may then formulate their own opinions and proposals for policy.

5. E-consultation

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. (OECD, 2001, p. 23)

ICT provides the potential to allow policy-makers to go directly to users of services and those at whom a policy is aimed to seek their input. While government would always have to weigh up carefully the different types of evidence available regarding the likely success of its draft policy, this is a potentially valuable addition to the range of evidence available. When consultation is merely informing government and where government reserves the right to make the final decisions, it can be argued that citizens will be able to have greater influence on policy content through consultation earlier in the policy making process rather than later. It can also be argued that consultation at the stage of a draft policy document requires citizens to have the communication skills to interpret the typical legalistic terminology of the document before commenting appropriately. Whereas if citizens are given the opportunity to comment before this stage in policy-making they will still need to be well-informed on issues, but the information could be made more readable and understandable. This could be achieved using technologies discussed in the previous section.

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These points are highlighted by Rosen (2001) in a review of e-democracy trials by Swedish local authorities. He states that consultation is usually carried out at the policy creation stage, when (Rosen, 2001, p. 6):

> *It is unclear what the final decision may be, which in turn means that consultation may also be needed at a later stage when the final decision has begun to take shape.*

This finding underlines the need for consultation at several stages of the policy process. On the other hand, the Netherlands government e-consultation guidelines (Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 1998, p. 13), argue for consultation earlier rather than later, stating that e-consultation:

> *Will only make sense if the process of making decisions on a certain subject is in an early phase; in other words, when the matter is still open to modification.*

Tools required

Using Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

The OECD report *Citizens as Partners* (2001) divides citizen feedback into unsolicited and solicited. With regard to unsolicited feedback the report (OECD, 2001, p. 47) states:

> *Public offices at all levels of government receive a steady stream of feedback from the public – which can yield valuable information on policy implementation and service delivery if subject to systematic assessment.*

One way to respond to, and keep track of, such feedback is by government websites having a "Frequently Asked Questions" section. A Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) is just what it sounds like, and collections of these pertaining to specific topics are generically known as FAQs on the Web. However, maintaining a FAQ list requires effort [see for example the "Faq-O-Matic" User Guide *http://faqomatic.sourceforge.net/fom-serve/cache/2.html* (consulted February 2002)]. An electronic FAQ manager could help government to satisfy more effectively citizens' needs, and, at the same time, help keep track of questions posed by citizens. Some commercial FAQ systems are available for example "FAQ-Manager" (CGI World by I2 Services Inc., at *www.cgi-world.com*) and the open-source software "FAQ-O-Matic". This system automates the process of maintaining a FAQ list. It allows visitors to the FAQ to take part in keeping it up to date. The EDEN research project, referred to in Annex 2 is developing a linguistic tool that will allow automatic and assisted preparation of FAQ lists from questions and answers, and summary lists of expressed opinions. Such lists will be fed into the "local administration knowledge base".

The "Congress online" project in the US has also considered how Congress should handle email. The project website states:

> "*Until now, rather than enhancing democracy – as so many hoped – e-mail has heightened tensions and public disgruntlement with Congress. Fortunately, this problem is reversible, but it will require Congress to devote greater attention to addressing it and adjustments in public expectations and e-mail practices*."

A report, published by the project team in August 2002, explains how Congress is turning to web-based forms in order to manage the number of electronic messages it receives each day.

Online discussion fora

With regard to solicited feedback the OECD report *Citizens as Partners* (OECD, 2001) differentiates between "feedback" and "consultation", the latter requiring significantly more interaction and deliberation than the former. "Feedback" can be gathered online through electronic surveys and opinion polls and as well as the Internet, SMS text messaging could be used. "Consultation" input can be gathered by online discussion forums.

In general, e-consultations through discussion forums have taken one of two forms that correspond to different stages of policy decision-making. Those focusing on policy issues at an early stage of policy-making, or those centred on draft policies or laws produced at a later stage:

- **Issue-based fora,** *i.e.* organised around policy issues that have been formulated by policy-makers, interest groups or "experts", and presented as the heading of one or more discussion "threads". Responses are sought in order to gauge opinion or solicit ideas. Position statements, links to topic-related websites and other background information may also be presented.
- **Policy-based fora,** *i.e.* organised around themes/issues that relate directly to a draft policy that is meant to address these, and where discussion threads are intended to solicit responses from those affected. Participants might be encouraged to submit alternative ideas and suggestions but the format implies that what is being sought is an indication of how far the participants agree (or not) with the proposals, and why.

Developing e-consultation websites

One way to integrate tools with relevant information on the policy topic and with other news and information is to develop an e-consultation website [for example see *www.e-consultant.org.uk* (consulted February, 2002)]. The following is a non-exhaustive list of possible components that could be usefully incorporated into an e-consultation website. The exact list of components will depend on a number of factors including the **objective** of the consultation, the **type** of e-consultation and the **target audience**.

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Box 5.1. **Germany – Consultation on the Freedom of Information Act**

The Federal Ministry of the Interior has set up an online discussion forum on the Freedom of Information Act. The draft bill was made available for public discussion at an early stage. Citizens' opinions and arguments could thus be fed directly into the legislative process. Digital discussions are intended to ensure that more attention is given to citizens' views in the opinion- and policy-forming stage. Citizens and interest groups have, it is true, long been able to participate in the policy-forming process – but their options for co-ordinating their input were limited. As well as enabling communication between citizens and Government, the new technology makes it possible for all those involved to discuss matters with each other. The offer to comment was largely taken up by the public and the input was of good quality which led to changes in the original draft.

See: *www.bmi.bund.de/top/dokumente/Artikel/ix_44441.htm*

A design template for online consultation websites

Overview: a welcoming page outlining the purpose, target audience, timetable of the consultation, who is undertaking the consultation, and why. It may include a clear statement regarding the conditions of use of the website (*e.g.* specifying that offensive language will be removed). In general, the overview should follow best practice guidelines for off-line consultations as referenced elsewhere in this report.

Background information: this is where citizens can be informed about the consultation issue. It can comprise comprehensive pages on the consultation subject or link to other electronic sources for more detailed information. The accessibility and understandability of such information, as discussed in the previous section, is crucial.

Consultation tool/technique: the exact tool/technique used to gather citizens' comments depends on the type of consultation being undertaken. Several of the examples given above could fit into this framework, *e.g.* online surveys, opinion polls, discussion forums.

Other ways to be involved: this is where details of events and other non-electronic consultation activities associated with the topic are described, providing a level of co-ordination and integration between off-line and online consultation exercises.

Feedback: space for a statement from those organising the consultation on the results and effects of the consultation once the consultation is complete and contributions have been analysed.

Review site: an online questionnaire for users to complete in order to support continuous improvement of the consultation exercise.

Contributors: a list of the names and countries of all those who make a contribution can be displayed here, subject to national data protection legislation.

Log-in/Logoff: this is where user registration occurs, if necessary.

Tell a friend: this allows the promotion of the online consultation electronically, for example, users can automatically email people they feel would be interested in participating in the consultation.

The above is provided as a template of what could be appropriate on e-consultation Web pages. The actual consultation technique can be slotted in as appropriate or multiple consultation techniques used. Whichever consultation technique is used, most commentators agree for the need to encourage and support informed participation by the citizens. For discussion forums, Powazek suggests burying the "post it" button in order to deter "spur of the moment" responses, noting that: "The more clicks it takes, the better the post will be." (Powazek, 2001, p. 53).

As well as the citizen-orientated sections, the management of the e-consultation process could be facilitated by additional password-protected administrative services. These could include functions to:

- View and monitor the comments added in the last 24 hours.
- Remove from view comments that breached the "conditions of use" statement.
- View the most frequently read comments.
- View the comments received from specific postcode areas.
- View the entries to online user-evaluation questionnaire.

Again, this is only a sample of possible administrative facilities that are needed and therefore could be included in any e-consultation system. By providing the appropriate "administrative" functions, policy-makers have the ability to read comments and, relatively easily, judge the progress of the e-consultation right from the start of the exercise.

Technology to support online deliberation

In the 1970s Horst Rittel termed problems characterised by indeterminacy and complexity as "wicked" problems. These types of problems require deliberative discussion where consensus can emerge through debate with alternative options and competing interests being exposed. The policy-making process is a good example of this type of "wicked" problem and can typically be characterised as:

- Not easily defined in such a way that all stakeholders agree that this is the problem to solve.
- Has no clear stopping rules, it is only the time limits on consultation that mark the end of a problem solving period.
- There is no clear cut right or wrong approach, instead there are better or worse solutions.
- Difficult to provide objective measures of success.
- Policy making is an iterative process.
- Solutions and/or options have to be discovered.
- Although policy options may be similar, each is unique.
- The level of detail necessary to define the problem is a matter of judgement.
- There is strong moral and political pressure against failure.

To support the solution of these types of problems Rittel developed IBIS (Issue-Based Information Systems) – a language and graphical representation scheme for visualising argumentation. It was originally a hypertext environment for the structured discussion of design issues.

Computer Supported Collaborative Work (CSCW) and Computer Supported Collaborative Argumentation (CSCA) – the latter developing since the 1970s – are two major areas of research that provide support for e-consultation. Two examples of projects are provided below to give an indication of the type and extent of research in this area and its relevance to e-consultation.

Online moderation systems

The ZENO system was originally developed from work in CSCA. Zeno is a mediation system, *i.e.* a discussion forum with special support for deliberation, the process of discussing, arguing and negotiating issues of practical importance. Zeno provides particular support to those responsible for moderating these kinds of discussions. The Zeno server is a Java application for the World Wide Web which enables and facilitates moderated issue-based discussion forums in a secure environment. Zeno discussion forums are integrated with a workspace facility for sharing classified documents (see *http://zeno.fhg.de* consulted January, 2003).

Support to "offline" deliberation

The second project is Compendium which is based on IBIS to support face-face meetings. It facilitates substantive discussions, helps identify gaps and action items for follow-up, and leaves behind a record of the meeting so that the next meeting can build on it. Compendium can deal with issues where there is no objective problem definition but there are a lot of interpretations, there is no right answer but there are lots of tentative next

steps. Compendium is based on the concept that collaboration among participants is the best approach to problem solving (see Conklin, 2001). One could imagine the situation where off-line consultation meetings could be facilitated with the support of tools like Compendium.

Mapping online deliberation

Work from the Social Computing Group at MIT Media Lab focuses on how to make sense of and visualise online conversations. One result from this research is *Conversation Map* which is basically a newsgroup browser designed to make it easier for participants to understand and reflect on very large-scale conversations like large, electronic-mail lists or busy Usenet newsgroups. The system analyses the content and the relationships between messages and then uses the results of the analysis to create a graphical interface. With the graphical interface, a participant can see the social and semantic relationships that have emerged over the course of the discussion. The Conversation Map system computes and then graphs out who is "talking" to whom, what they are "'talking" about, and the central terms and possible metaphors of the conversation (Sack, 2000).

Box 5.2. **Italy – Municipality of Bologna and the DEMOS project**

The Municipality of Bologna is a member of the **DEMOS** (Delphi Mediation Online System) project – a European research and development project aimed at the diffusion and promotion of e democracy, administered by a European consortium of eight partners, two of which are Italian (Municipality of Bologna and Nexus-IBA, ONLUS of Milan). The project aims to develop new ways in which to allow community participation in the decision processes of the public administration. The project aims to develop on line consultation in each stage of the policy making process through moderated discussion forums. The thought behind it is that it is simply not enough to provide areas of discussion on various arguments, because the user then would inevitably lose themselves in the *mare magnum* of the various themes and assorted comments. Instead, it is more useful to create and develop a model of "structured on line community", under the supervision of one or two moderators and with the involvement of experts. DEMOS can therefore favour the involvement of a large number of citizens in discussion at European, national or local level on political and administrative themes.

Currently, two prototypes are being tested. The first, on the subject of traffic in Bologna is one of the case studies in section 13 of this report.

See: *www.comune.bologna.it*

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Limits to online consultation

A question raised in any e-engagement initiative is the question of how representative the results of such online dialogue are. A major objection to e-engagement is that not enough citizens will become involved and that the technology is giving government self-selected comments. There is the risk that an active minority achieves an influence far beyond their number. Coleman and Gøtze (2001, p. 15) argue that if a key objective of online engagement is to inform elected representatives then the selection of participants need not be concerned with representativeness and more concerned to engage a broad range of experience.

However, given the current uptake of ICT, and specifically the Internet, in OECD member countries any e-engagement initiative should be seen as just one way to engage citizens. This typically means that there is a need to ensure **multiple channels** for citizen input and the need to ensure that e-contributions are fully integrated with offline contributions.

6. E-participation

> **Active participation:** a relationship based on partnership with government in which citizens actively engage in defining the process and content of policy-making. It acknowledges equal standing for citizens in setting the agenda, proposing policy options and shaping the policy dialogue – although the responsibility for the final decision or policy formulation rests with government. (OECD, 2001, p. 23)

By allowing citizens only to decide between offered choices or comment on a fixed "menu" of options, government loses the opportunity for maximum input from citizens, while citizens are unable to express their true thoughts. Sclove (1995, p. 39) concludes that:

> *Decision-making processes are democratically inadequate, even spurious, unless they are combined with relatively equal and extensive opportunities for citizens, communities, and groups to help shape the decision-making agendas.*

The OECD report *Citizens as Partners* (OECD, 2001) states that few countries have started to address active participation, and that examples of good practice are rare. Therefore, although the emphasis in this report is on citizen engagement with national government we feel it would be useful to give a very positive example of how one particular parliament, the Scottish Parliament in the UK, is addressing e-participation through e-petitioning.

E-petitioning

In many countries around the world, citizens have long used petitions to make their feelings known about issues that concern them. Simply, a petition is a formal request to a higher authority, *e.g.* parliament or other authority, signed by one or a number of citizens. The format of petitions and the way petitions are submitted and subsequently considered by parliaments varies greatly (OECD, 2001, p. 19). Few countries have used technology to enable electronic petitioning to the extent of the Scottish Parliament.

One of the main documents setting out how the new Scottish Parliament should work was The Consultative Steering Group document (The Scottish Office, 1998). This stated that the Scottish Parliament should aspire to use all forms of information and communication technology "innovatively and appropriately" to support the Group's guiding principles of *openness*, *accessibility* and *participation*.

On the issue of petitions, the Consultative Steering Group stated:

> "*It is important to enable groups and individuals to influence the Parliament's agenda. We looked at a number of models in other Parliaments for handling petitions and concluded that the best of these encouraged petitions; had clear and simple rules as to form and content; and specified clear expectations of how petitions would be handled.*"

To achieve this, the Scottish Parliament established a dedicated Public Petitions Committee (PPC) to actively promote petitions as a means by which the public could effectively raise issues of concern with the Parliament. The remit of the PPC is to consider and report on whether a public petition is admissible and what action is to be taken on the petition. There are no restrictions on who can submit a petition. A petition submitted by an individual will be considered on equal terms with one submitted with a large number of supporting signatures. The PPC considers the merits of the issues raised in each admissible petition and makes a decision on the appropriate action to be taken in each case. This can involve requesting other committees in the Parliament (generally those with the remit to examine specific subject areas) to carry out further consideration of the issues raised, or requesting the views of, or action by, the Scottish Executive (the devolved government for Scotland), local authorities and other public bodies in Scotland.

The electronic petitioning system used by citizens to submit petitions to the Scottish Parliament is called "e-petitioner" (see *www.e-petitioner.org.uk*, consulted February 2002). An in-depth description of e-petitioner is published elsewhere (Macintosh, Malina and Farrell, 2002), and it is only necessary here to explain its main "participation" features. The e-petitioner tool is designed to:

- **View** a petition text online.
- **Read** additional information on the petition issue online.

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- Those deciding to support the petition can **add** their name and address to the petition online.
- All citizens can join an integrated online discussion forum and add **comments** for or against each e-petition.

Precise guidelines produced by the PPC in relation to petitioning the Scottish Parliament provide citizens with help in creating appropriate e-petitions. Management procedures have been put in place to incorporate the submission of e-petitions into the normal workflow of the PPC. A briefing note accompanies each e-petition. This contains the petition text, a list of names and addresses of those supporting the petition. An analysis of the geographical spread of supporters is included so that MSPs can see how many of their constituents support the petition. Also there is a summary of the discussion forum highlighting the main arguments for and against the petition.

Finally, the Committee ensures that petitioners are kept informed of progress at each stage of the Parliament's consideration of their petition. This **feedback** is reflected on the e-petitioner website. The actions of the Committee have resulted in a range of positive outcomes, from local solutions to petitioners' concerns to amendments to legislation – thus demonstrating active participation.

Online referenda

Referenda, initiated by citizens, is an established way to introduce items onto the political agenda and influence policy content in some OECD member countries. The development of online referenda is the natural extension to this. Depending on legislation in the specific countries, this may necessitate similar levels of security and citizen authentication that is needed for legally binding e-voting. Several voting technologies, *i.e.* by SMS, interactive digital TV, electronic kiosk voting and remote electronic voting are potentially applicable. However, the design of the system would have to accommodate the different extent to which sophisticated user interfaces could, or could not, be developed.

E-petitions and e-referenda are just two of the potential mechanisms for e-participation. Participation in designing public policies can also be influenced by analysis of, for example, emails, FAQ lists, chat rooms (see Box 6.1), discussion forums, and online "visiting hours" for elected representatives. The development of "online communities" of interest, in which specific policy issues are debated and alternative proposals formulated, are also promising examples of active participation online.

Box 6.1. **Kista – e-participation through chat rooms**

Kista, a borough within the City of Stockholm, opened their "Kista Portal" in January 1997. The minutes from the District Council have been published on the Web since 1998, and interactive features such as discussion forums, chat, and "question of the month" have featured since April 2000. The Kista portal attracts some 6 000 unique visits per month. There is a special e-engagement area where different topics can be discussed. Importantly it has been designed so that people in the administration and in the political organisation can answer questions within normal work practice. Politicians are available for real-time chat during certain hours every week which is in conjunction with the "Politicians' corner", an event at the Borough Hall where politicians are (physically) available to citizens for open discussions. One interesting point is that the opinion of the team developing the e-democracy department is that participation should be open not just for inhabitants but also for people working and studying in Kista, as these people are also part of the life and development of the district. Hence, they should be allowed to participate in discussion forums as well as in opinion polls.

See: *www.kista.stockholm.se*

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B. Constraints and Challenges

7. The digital divide

OECD guiding principle number 5 on "objectivity" states (OECD, 2001, p. 15):

Information provided by government during policy-making should be objective, complete and accessible. All citizens should have equal treatment when exercising their rights of access to information and participation.

History has shown the fragile nature of democracy and, at times, how easy it is to displace it. In applying ICTs to the democratic process care has to be taken not to make democracy a more vulnerable concept. The **digital divide and its implications** for political equality are potential danger areas for democracy. For several years, a central worry in many OECD countries has been the consequences of unequal access, lack of proper infrastructure and low adoption of technology. This has created a digital divide, excluding many, particularly those in already socially disadvantaged groups, from the perceived benefits of the Information Society.

A recent OECD report states that:

Across the OECD, attention is focusing increasingly on what has been dubbed the "digital divide" – a term that refers to the gaps in access to information and communication technology (ICT). The stakes are high, as ICT is now integral to the social fabric and is the catalyst for "new economies" to emerge. Exclusion threatens the IT "have-nots", whether individuals, groups or entire countries.

… The evidence shows that ICT can be the solution to inequalities rather than their cause – digital diversity and opportunity rather than digital divide. (OECD, 2000b)

The digital divide comprises individuals, communities, people in employment and unemployed people. Until relatively recently the digital divide was taken to mean the divide existing between those who had access to ICTs and those who did not have access to ICTs. This simple "have" and "have-nots" access definition has attracted considerable criticism, for example by Wilhelm (2000). He refutes the notion that the information underclass can be defined in terms of access. He argues strongly against the previous definitions given by, for example, Raab (1996) and Civille (1995). He claims that what remains missing from these definitions is the broader context of a person's information seeking behaviour, media use patterns, and cultural and environmental contexts.

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Research conducted on behalf of the Greater London Authority (Foley, *et al.*, 2002) outlines a strategy to address the digital divide in London. The report highlights the fact that the digital divide is not just about socioeconomic factors. Although low-income, low levels of education, low skilled jobs, unemployment and lack of technology skills are a barrier to the adoption and use of ICTs, the research also highlighted socio-personal factors as important. These factors include low levels of awareness, interest, understanding and acceptance of ICTs. The report concludes that to date most research has centred on the socio-economic elements and that research on the socio-personal has been neglected. The report contains an extensive bibliography on the digital divide.

Optimists and pessimists

Norris (2001) and others note the views of pessimists who fear an escalation of existing inequalities and optimists who hold that new ICTs have potential to widen opportunities for more democratic participation. A number of innovative initiatives are underway in many OECD member countries to address the digital divide but at this point in time it is too early to say whether, and to what extent, they will achieve their objectives. Research in this area is relatively new and the information that is available mainly comes from quantitative surveys concerning use by gender, age or location. There is little empirical data relating to how and why people use ICTs. Long term research programmes are needed to address these issues.

Box 7.1. **European Union – addressing the digital divide in Europe**

The impact on Internet take-up in homes in the European Union is published in the Eurobarometer.

In November 2001 the "Flash Eurobarometer 112 – Internet and the public at large" stated that for Greek households the Internet penetration was approximately 10%, for UK household 50% and for The Netherlands it was greater than 60%. Overall Internet penetration in northern Europe, particularly the Nordic countries is greater than in the US, however in southern Europe it is less than 10%.

Specific measures put forward by the European Commission include acquisition of basic digital skills, access for all through a range of technologies including iDTV and mobile phones, and particular focus on access in outlying and depressed areas. The 2002 goal is to achieve physical access to the Internet then the next stage is to consider content so as to stimulate access.

See: *http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/flash/fl112_en.pdf*.

When one of the objectives of e-engagement is to reach a wide target audience, there is a natural concern about the digital divide and hence the **bias of Internet based engagement** has to be addressed. On the other hand, there is an increasing uptake and use of technology. This increase coupled with the number of OECD member countries who have, or who are developing, strategies for digital inclusion means that the digital divide barrier is being addressed (see for example Malina and Macintosh, 2003).

The report by Coleman and Gøtze (2001, p. 16) takes a positive stance with respect to e-democracy and the digital divide:

> *The solution to the problem of digital exclusion does not lie in abandoning the Internet as a tool for democratic engagement and consultation, but in creating new opportunities for connecting citizens without home access to the Internet. Such opportunities can be provided by public kiosks, cyber-cafes and community centres, as well as via TV and other digital platforms. As well as these channels for digital inclusion, wider aspects of usability need to be addressed.*

With respect to e-Government and the digital divide, an OECD report (2002, p. 10) states:

> *As e-Government is more widely implemented, it may both provide incentives to increase ICT use by citizens and businesses and accentuate existing digital differences.*

The rapid developments in new technologies – interactive TV, light weight browsing technology, high bandwidth mobile phones, speech recognition, natural language and other technologies are combining forces to produce powerful future mobile devices. Third generation mobile (3GM) phones with broadband wireless communications will become available within the next 3 to 5 years. Digital TV broadcasts providing access to Web-based services will become increasingly important for governments seeking to reach a wide cross-section of the population. The results of research in Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence will support e-engagement in the future, making it easier for citizens to interact with the technology and also support decision-making. Just one example, out of many, is from the MIT InfoLab Group in the US which is developing intelligent interactive software systems that help people access information and solve problems on human terms, (see *www.ai.mit.edu/projects/infolab/*).

Even so, e-engagement should be seen as just one route for participation and be supported by other off-line engagement activities. Off-line and online engagement activities need to be clearly integrated with one another.

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Box 7.2. **New Zealand – The need for equity**

What is important for New Zealand is to ensure that it makes change that is meaningful for New Zealanders, in ways and at a rate that does not disenfranchise them. In this there is room for application of the Pareto principle (*i.e.* Don't make anyone worse off in the process of advantaging some). Equity concerns stemming from the digital divide place a limit on how quickly real progress can be made. This is especially important because of the Treaty of Waitangi that exists between the Crown and the indigenous Maori population, which is currently over-represented among those on the wrong side of the digital divide. This gives a double emphasis on the fact that the ways that people and government relate is something that government should not make major changes to in advance of what the public actually want and are ready for.

Box 7.3. **Italy – Internet penetration**

A recent review conducted in Italy found that, "increasingly, local council websites are vehicles for information giving and decreasingly, are vehicles to facilitate social interaction or to involve citizens in the decisional processes of the administration" (Miani, 2002). An important factor to bear in mind is the relative lag behind in Italy compared to Western European standards of the average household having a PC and access to the Internet, and perhaps even less familiarity with consulting central and local administration Internet pages on a regular basis. In 2001, at least 25% of Italians were online which is an improvement on previous years but nevertheless, not extensive (as quoted in the RUR-CENSIS Sixth Report on Digital Cities – an annual report on the state of ICT in Local Administration). The development of a tradition of consulting citizens online will go hand in hand with the development of the Internet as a common and everyday tool.

Box 7.4. **Czech Republic – The eVA project**

The pilot project called eVA (electronic friendly administration) has been running in the Czech Republic since February 2002. There are info-kiosks installed in smaller municipalities (towns: Slany, Podebrady, Beroun; municipalities: Smecno, Klobuky, Zvoleneves, Morina, Mestec Kralove and Patek) with the aim to strengthen and simplify the communication between citizens and the municipal office. Approximately 12 issues have been picked to be settled through the info-kiosk. The main functions include: guidelines for settling particular matters; necessary forms; ability to send completed forms to the relevant institution; feedback to the citizens from the municipal office; information and regional news. The accessibility outside office hours and the removal of any negative "human factor" issues are the main advantages of the system. This pilot is being monitored for one year, then the outcomes will be assessed and a decision made whether it should be extended to other municipalities.

Challenge No. 1 – The problem of scale

If we are successful in reaching and engaging with a wider audience, the challenge will rapidly become one of coping with the problem of **scale**. From a government perspective, there is the challenge of how to listen to and respond to every individual, from a citizen perspective, there is the challenge of how to get an individual's point of view heard.

8. Active citizenship

OECD guiding principle number 10 on "active citizenship" states (OECD, 2001, p. 15):

> *Governments benefit from active citizens and a dynamic civil society and can take concrete actions to facilitate access to information and participation, raise awareness, strengthen citizens' civic education and skills as well as to support capacity-building among civil society organisations.*

Online community building

ICTs offer the opportunity to explore aspects of virtual communities as local e-engagement spaces. We need to build on work at the local level fostering community networks and encouraging active citizenship. ICTs present new opportunities for civic networking. However the issues relating to

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the digital divide discussed above are very relevant here. The work of Rheingold (Rheingold, 2000, p. 377) on virtual communities assesses the potential impact of civic networks, questioning the relationship between virtual communities and the revitalisation of democracy, stating:

> *As long as that divide continues to grow even while usage of new media grows explosively, no discussion of technology assisted democracy can begin without mentioning the key question of who can afford to take advantage of new media.*

Tsagarousianou *et al.,* (1998), describe a number of projects involved with e-democracy and civic networking. These authors suggest that centrally designed government-led initiatives will clearly differ from grassroots civic developments, but argue also that "civic networking will not realise its objective unless it becomes more realistic in its goals and methods" (Tsagarousianou *et al., 1998*, p. 13). There is a need to build on knowledge gained from projects at community level, for example, the *Locality in the Global Net* in Finland (Heinonen *et al.*, 2001).

However, having provided access to communities there remains the question of what citizens are actually capable of contributing. Splichal (1999, p. 66) argues that people can be capable of reasoning, but also argues that people can be prone to ignorance and faulty reasoning. So even though governments are pushing forward in engaging citizens more in the policy process, there is also the concern that this could lead to errors in judgement and bad policy decisions.

Coleman and Gøtze (2001, p. 12) address this issue and conclude:

> *The old dichotomy between experts and the public is false and sterile. Considerable expertise resides within the public (which is made up, after all, of doctors, nurses, entrepreneurs, police officers, social workers, victims of crime, teachers, elders) and the trick is to find innovative ways of drawing out the expertise and feeding it into the hitherto bureaucratised decision-making process. Providing the public with appropriate information about policy issues and utilising public experience and expertise in the process of policy formation, development and evaluation requires the cultivation of a critical and deliberative political culture.*

Engaging young people

The involvement of otherwise disenfranchised young people is becoming increasingly important to policy makers. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has provided impetus to the development of a "rights culture" around children and young people. Similarly, concerns over generally low levels of democratic participation have led to significant curricular development in citizenship education. Research has shown that there is a general lack of interest by young people in local politics (*e.g.* Park, 1999),

Box 8.1. **The Netherlands – Digital breeding grounds: social networks**

The year 2002 saw the establishment of so-called digital breeding grounds to stimulate the use of ICT for social purposes such as improving the quality of life, safety, health care and human interaction. The digital breeding grounds are one of four actions in the "Social Cohesion and ICT Action Programme", a joint initiative of the Ministry for Urban Policy and Integration of Ethnic Minorities and of the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management, with the objective of improving the social fabric through ICT. Currently, four cities (The Hague, Amsterdam, Deventer and Eindhoven) have been appointed as breeding grounds and receive € 1.82 million in funding. A breeding ground brings different groups of people together and supports initiatives taken by local residents, neighbourhood organisations and local businesses. Each breeding ground has a demonstrator project. Whether or not the breeding grounds will be successful remains to be seen, but the strength of the initiative appears to lie in the grass-roots approach, and an awareness that we must invest at least as much in the social processes as we are investing in ICT.

Website:
www.rogervanboxtel.nl/asp/page.asp?id=i001239&alias=ministervanboxtel

however, local policy has consequences for them, therefore local government needs effective mechanisms to reach out to young residents.

Studies of young peoples' attitudes to political practice (*e.g.* Bentley *et al.*, 1999, White *et al.*, 2000) have shown widespread disregard for conventional politics, but also widespread dissatisfaction with their lack of involvement. A theme that emerges strongly from these studies is that the style of "political" communication is at least as important as the substance. Despite active interest in and engagement with a variety of issues, many young people are "turned off" adult politics by dislike of party structures, the style of debate, the formality of communication. Studies of media use by young people (*e.g.* Livingstone and Bovill, 1999) show that young people have very broad media literacy.

The UK Government's consultation paper on a policy for electronic democracy (HM Government, 2002, p. 20) stressed the need to better engage young people. It states:

> *One important target group for this policy is young people. All democratic institutions have a responsibility to ensure young people are able to play their part. Evidence suggests that young people are among those least likely to see the*

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democratic process as relevant to them. Young people are also among the most likely to be competent in ICT.

There is an opportunity to build on young people's generally strong uptake of the Internet as a medium for entertainment and learning and use this as a lever for democratic involvement that addresses young people's current dissatisfaction and apathy towards politics.

However this interest in technology is not sufficient in itself to address this democratic deficit. An electronic consultation to consult young people in Scotland (referenced in Coleman and Gøtze, 2001, p. 42) conducted in 2000, asked young people to: comment on the top 20 issues facing young people in Scotland and vote for the top 10 issues that they thought were the most important ones. The evaluation of the consultation showed that most young

Box 8.2. **Finland – Engaging Finnish Youth**

A website built by the Finnish Youth Corporation Allianssi and the Ministry of Education provides an informative channel of topical societal matters and a discussion forum. It is directed especially to young people from 14 to 19 years of age. The content of the website has been formulated in co-operation with students and special press officers of youth information. It gives users an opportunity to participate in planning the content of the website. It is therefore not only an information and discussion channel but also an open forum to all important approaches made by both civil organisations and individual activists. By this dialogue Valtikka aims at making the youths' attachment to the societal processes easier and making those processes understandable and interesting for them.

The idea behind Valtikka is that comments and ideas that are simply left to be seen on the website are not enough to make participation meaningful. Because of that decision makers and experts are invited to answer questions posed by users. The results of weekly opinion polls are commented on by experts, also experts are interviewed on the site whenever there is major news touching the lives of young people or when new laws are being issued. Valtikka aims not only to present structures and activities of society but also the people working within it. It is an open channel for actors of civil society and civil servants, elected officials, MPs, professionals and experts – for anybody who wants to be involved in promoting young people's involvement in society. One may contribute by either writing to column section of the site or by answering the questions raised by youth on the "Ask Valtikka" page. The promotional campaign which is focused on young people and their interest groups is supported by posters, postcards and banner ads.

See: *www.valtikka.net*

Box 8.3. **Italy – Municipality of Casalecchio di Reno, DIRE**

DIRE is a project to prepare a new generation of citizens for new ways of interacting and communicating with central and local administrations and paves the way for greater online citizen participation in civic life and policy making. The project is aimed at high school children within the area of Casalecchio to train them in the use of new forms of civic participation through the use of ICT and a greater awareness of new communication technologies. The project will last for 5 years and includes a series of initiatives, such as the building of new technology labs in schools, a training course led by university lecturers on the use of computers and information networks, the establishment of an online discussion forum where students can exchange opinions and ideas, teaching them the necessary language and jargon and allowing them to experiment with ways of discussion and interaction with administrations. The project is conducted in partnership with the University of Bologna.

See: *www.comune.casalecchio.bo.it/Informa/urpsitoweb5.nsf*

Box 8.4. **Scotland – Highland Youth Voice Project**

Highland Youth Voice is an initiative of Highland Council to encourage young people living in the Highland region of Scotland to participate in democratic decision making about their own lives. Youth Voice members, aged 14 to 18, are elected to a Highland Youth Voice Parliament. Scotland's Highland region is a large (25 748 square km) and sparsely populated area (averaging 8 persons per square km) making communication, particularly face to face meetings, a problem for Youth Voice. Thus the website serves as a communication tool among Youth Voice members between meetings. It also serves as a communication tool between Youth Voice and all young people in the region: it facilitates their involvement and extends participation to them. To this end the website enables three types of activity:

- Communication about the progress and activities of Youth Voice.
- Online discussion of issues affecting young people in the area.
- Online elections, every other year, for Youth Voice members.

Each set of activities is covered by a section of the website. The initiative involves young people in the design of their own website – the emphasis is on participatory Web design to encourage young people's empowerment.

See: *www.highlandyouthvoice.org*

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people found the technology easy to use, and thought they would use it again for other consultations. (*See http://e-consultant.org.uk/ScottishYouth/* consulted January 2003). The most frequently mentioned "like" was the opportunity to express an opinion and vote, and the most disliked aspect was the inability to add to the range of issues. Most thought that ICTs were generally a "good way to voice your opinion". There were a few concerns about entering personal details, but the most frequently voiced concern was that the comments would not "make a difference". This is a concern that cannot be addressed by technology alone.

Challenge No. 2 – Building capacity

The challenge is how to harness ICTs to constructively encourage deliberation by citizens on public issues – listening to, and engaging in, argument and counter arguments.

9. Analysis and feedback of e-contributions

OECD guiding principle number 8 on "accountability" states (OECD, 2001, p. 15):

> *Governments have an obligation to account for the use they make of citizens' input received through feedback, public consultation and active participation. Measures to ensure that the policy-making process is open, transparent and amenable to external scrutiny and review are crucial to increasing government accountability overall.*

This section looks at the appropriateness of ICTs to facilitate the analysis and feedback of electronic contributions. It also addresses the issue of feedback, in other words how to use technology to keep citizens informed on how their contribution is being dealt with and where it fits in the policy process.

There are two main drivers for ICT to be developed to support the analysis and feedback of e-contributions. These are, firstly, the **danger of "e-consultation fatigue"** caused by lack of government feedback on citizens' contributions and then, directly connected to this, the amount of resources that could potentially be required to undertake such analysis and feedback.

As we have seen, many OECD member countries are looking at new, innovative ways to involve and engage citizens in the democratic decision making process. They are doing this by focusing on disseminating more information on policy and soliciting feedback on it. However there is a danger

in this – several commentators have noted a lack of correspondence between this growing call for comments on policy and their real influence and impact on actual policy content. Lack of timely and appropriate feedback could give rise to disillusionment about consultation even before governments have effectively harnessed technology to enable e-consultation, a measure which could allow a greater number of citizens to comment on policy.

Analysis of e-contributions

Governments need to re-think how they analyse citizens' contributions, whether they are solicited or unsolicited. Clearly this is a cultural and organisational issue that cannot be solved by merely turning to technology. However, technology can be an enabler for change. The complex task of analysing vast amounts of unstructured information could be supported by technology. For example, the very nature of online discussion forum lends itself to content analysis.

Some issues that need to be addressed are:

- Who defines the criteria by which citizens' inputs are analysed?
- How can e-contributions be incorporated into decision-making?
- How are judgements made about the relative weight of e-contributions with respect to other inputs?
- How, and to what extent, can technology help highlight areas of agreement and disagreement?
- Can technology adequately support the summarisation and content analysis of contributions?

For e-consultation, a characteristic of issue-based and policy-based discussion forums, is that "threads" of conversation are available for analysis, without the need to transcribe a face-to-face discussion or comments received in writing. Rather than being paraphrased by a facilitator or reporter, the "threads" of conversation are visible and contributions are made in participants own words. This makes various kinds of analysis more feasible, for example:

- Summarising the *substance* of the responses, to identify the participants' main concerns, their level of support for any draft proposals, or their suggestions for action they think necessary to address problems raised.
- Analysing the *quality of deliberation*, in terms of how the participants make the claims that they make, for example how they identify themselves, how they use their claimed identity to justify what they say, how they support their arguments by referring to background information, or by responding to other participants' comments.

Content analysis involving both quantitative and qualitative methods can be used to summarise comments made in discussion forums. Analysts

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may rate comments against a coding scheme to categorise the level of support indicated by a comment (Krippendorf 1980). Wilhelm (1999) in an analysis of political newsgroups uses relatively simple content analysis categories to evaluate how far the participants provide and seek reasoned argument with evidence to support their contributions. A subset of Wilhelm's categories has been applied in analysing several cases of e-consultation (Whyte and Macintosh, 2001; Smith and Macintosh, 2001), these are:

- **Provide** – The comment is solely providing information in the form of facts or opinion.
- **Seek** – The comment includes evidence of information seeking in the form of queries or open-ended remarks.
- **Reply** – The comment replies to another previously posted.

The codes assigned are of course a matter of interpretation, but if such "coding" forms part of a discussion moderator's task, then they are, at least, assigned impartially.

There are a variety of well known qualitative analysis approaches to developing interpretative categories iteratively, for example ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987) and grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). These share the aim of interpreting large volumes of text to produce a narrative summary.

A "**thread**" **analysis** can help to assess to what extent particular topics have attracted in-depth discussion and so assess the quality of deliberation. The number of comments posted per thread, the average and total word count per thread, thread *depth*, (*i.e.* the number of levels of reply) and thread *length*, (*i.e.* length of time between first and last contribution) can all be studied. These have been used to analyse e-consultations in urban planning, for example in the case reported by Jankowski *et al.* (1997). The relative values of these figures give an indication of which issues the participants have been stimulated by, and which they have had most to say about. When there are a large number of responses this can also help in drawing attention to potentially significant areas of the debate.

Feedback

Appropriate feedback on citizens' input to e-consultation can, hopefully, contribute to the overall transparency, accountability and openness of government. However, as stated earlier, there is a marked lack of reports and information on e-engagement that clearly states how the results of the engagement have influenced the decision-making process and changed policy outcome. Perhaps, as governments view e-engagement studies as experimental, they do not feel that they should use input from pilots to change policy. However there is potentially a much more serious problem

given that even in traditional consultations it is difficult to find any direct relation between citizens' input and policy outcomes. This is, in part, due to the lack of attention so far to the issue of evaluating consultation – whether conducted using traditional or online tools. The report "Innovations in Citizens Participation in Government" (UK Parliament, 2001, p. 9) admits:

> *It was not easy to assess how far consultation actually changed outcomes. There were few examples of dramatic conversions in policy.*

This section has outlined some general criteria for assessing contributions that policy makers might consider relevant to the analysis of e-consultations and for providing citizens with feedback.

Box 9.1. **Australia – Challenges for governments**

E-democracy agencies can capture a wider range of views on policy matters. However, several challenges emerge and must be effectively managed. These include:

- *Integrating online citizen engagement with existing consultation tools*, including the question of whether this form of consultation reaches and is used by a wider audience, or whether it merely provides another means for the same individuals and groups to contribute to debate.
- *Managing citizen expectations and providing appropriate feedback*. There must be the means to ensure that citizens have a clear idea of what they can expect in terms of government feedback to their input, as well as the degree to which their input is considered in the development of government policy.
- *Managing what is likely to be a wider range of views*. There are three issues here:
  - Giving fair consideration to a great diversity of views where the range of outcomes is constrained by governments' policy, budgetary and operational imperatives.
  - No matter what the outcome of consultation, there will be individuals or groups within the community for whom these outcomes will be anathema. To limit unrealistic expectations it is important that this is accepted from the outset.
  - The volume of traffic. Pressure on resources from increased online traffic may impact on Governments' ability to effectively consider all views and manage citizens' expectations.

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Challenge No. 3 – Ensuring coherence

The challenge is to harness the potential of ICTs not only for online engagement but for analysis of, and feedback on, the contributions received. This information needs to be incorporated effectively in decision-making by taking a holistic view while ensuring coherence throughout the policy-making process.

10. Evaluation of e-engagement

OECD guiding principle number 9 on "evaluation" states (OECD, 2001, p. 15):

Governments need the tools, information and capacity to evaluate their performance in providing information, conducting consultation and engaging citizens, in order to adapt to new requirements and changing conditions for policy-making.

This chapter looks at how to evaluate e-engagement bearing in mind the lack of a comprehensive framework to evaluate participation in policy-making in general. There is also the question of evaluation from whose perspective *i.e.* that of government or of citizens?

Governments are increasingly turning to ICTs to support the policy-making processes. Email, online discussion forums and bulletin boards are now appearing on a large number of government-related websites along with the associated claims that government is now much better at reaching out to the citizens they represent and gathering their views and opinions. However, these claims have not, as yet, been substantiated. Links between developing the technology, civic inclusion and participation in the democratic process have not been explored systematically or comprehensively, although it is often assumed in statements made by government.

Some key questions to be addressed in undertaking evaluation are:

- To what extent, and in what ways, can ICTs make policy information more accessible and understandable to citizens?
- Do ICTs contribute to more openness and accountability in policy-making?
- Will ICTs encourage and assist the public to participate and facilitate consultation?
- How can ICTs enhance participation of the socially excluded?

Defining objectives

There is a growing requirement to better appreciate whether electronic engagement systems meet their objectives. But what exactly are the objectives against which e-engagements are to be evaluated? And from whose perspective should evaluation be conducted – from that of government, citizens or both?

In order to undertake evaluation it is first necessary to understand the purpose of the e-engagement. Earlier in this report (see section 2) a set of objectives of e-engagement were proposed, which may serve as a basis for evaluation.

1. **Reaching and engaging with a wider audience.** In this case the "ease of use" and "appropriate design" of the e-consultation site can be addressed. However a range of criteria other than usability are likely to affect the acceptability of the tool for its purpose.
2. **Providing relevant information.** Participants' use of background information that is made available online can be analysed, to give an indication of how relevant it has been.
3. **Enabling more in-depth consultation** and supporting deliberative debate which can be evaluated through content analysis and thread analysis of consultation discussion forums.
4. **Analysing contributions –** in which case analysis of what people have said in response to the consultation can be carried out more cost effectively since the responses are received in an electronic form (*i.e.* they do not need to be transcribed), and responses to closed questions can also be subjected to survey analysis techniques.
5. **Providing relevant and appropriate feedback to citizens** where the provision of information on the conduct and impact of the e-consultation is assessed.
6. **Monitoring and evaluating** – as well as communicating the results and using them to improve process.

However, "ease of use" is not just a narrow matter of ensuring task requirements are met, it is tied to all the other dimensions of engagement. The design must take into account the variety of target groups that are its expected users. It must also take into account the trust and privacy implications of the fact that users are being invited to share their views on political matters that directly affect them with others who they may never have met, depending on what "real-life" settings the website is to be used in.

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Three perspectives on evaluation

Whyte and Macintosh (2002) argue that to evaluate how effective e-consultations are in engaging a wide audience and enhancing deliberation so as to inform and influence the policy process, an analytical framework has to be developed that takes into account three overlapping perspectives: political, technical and social.

- The **political** perspective asks: Did the e-consultation process follow best practice guidelines for undertaking consultations that are published by government and were the stakeholders satisfied with the process?
- The **technical** perspective addresses: To what extent did the design of the ICTs directly affect the e-consultation outcomes? In designing the e-consultation there is a need to take into account echnical skills, the target audience and the location of the participants. Here they take as their starting point established evaluation frameworks from the software engineering and information systems communities and assess issues such as usability and accessibility.
- The **social** perspective asks: Were the contributions relevant to the policy topic, were they informed contributions and were the contributions debated and supported (or not) by others? This perspective is concerned with the extent to which the social conditions of those being consulted affect the communicative skills of citizens, their capability to contribute and the consultation outcomes.

Box 10.1. **Germany – Evaluating citizen consultation on urban planning use**

This is an example of using the Internet for e-consultation on urban land use planning in the town of Esslingen in South Germany (*www.esslingen.de*). The project took place in the framework of Media@Komm – a nationwide competition of the German Ministry of Economic Affairs to inspire and support e-Government and e-democracy projects. Over a four week period from May to June 2001 the local council held an e-consultation where the citizens could get information concerning a disputed zoning project, could discuss problems and could make suggestions concerning the proposed building site online.

The whole process was evaluated focussing upon three different areas: relevance, software, and moderation. The discussion of the topic was excellent and most of the citizens involved appreciated the features of the Internet as a tool for participation, however, establishing dialogue between citizens and local politicians proved to be a more difficult task because the latter were less willing to engage in a dialogue.

See: *www.wz-berlin.de/nu/pdf/ii01_308.pdf*

Table 1 suggests some evaluation issues that need to be addressed, to a greater or lesser extent, from a "political", "technical" and "social" perspective when undertaking an evaluation.

Table 1. **Issues for the evaluation of online engagement**

Evaluation Issue	How to address the issue
1. Was the e-consultation process conducted in line with best practice?	• Ask stakeholders if they are satisfied with the process. • Assess whether adequate resources are in place to conduct the consultation. • Check whether process followed best practice guidelines. • Assess whether the choice of an online tool was appropriate for the consultation.
2. Were the consultation objectives and what was expected of the citizens made clear?	• Ask stakeholders if they understand what is being asked. • Assess whether the participants' contributions are appropriate.
3. Did the consultation reach the target audience?	• Assess the adequacy of the promotion of the e-consultation. • Identify who and where they are, in terms of demographic and geographic characteristics.
4. Was the information provided appropriate and relevant?	• Assess how easily the participants can access the information. • Assess whether the participants' contributions were informed by it.
5. Were the contributions informed and appropriate?	• Assess to what extent the contributions address the consultation issue. • Assess how easily the participants can access contributions from others. • Classify contributions according to whether they provide information, ask questions, make suggestions. • Assess to what depth contributions respond to other contributions.
6. Was feedback provided both during and after the consultation?	• Assess whether questions are answered by government during the consultation. • Assess the extent the government feedback relates to the contributions.
7. Was there an impact on policy content?	• Check to what extent a change of policy is possible given the stage in the decision-making the consultation occurred. • Assess to what extent contributions are reflected in the revised or newly formulated policy.

Evaluation issues are easy to state at this general level, but their actual assessment has to deal with interdependencies between systems design, policy implementation, and the everyday politics and practice of communications between citizens and government agencies in all their complexity. In particular, evaluating "Was there an impact on policy content?" is a complex and challenging research question.

A generally accepted framework for the evaluation of information, consultation and public participation in policy-making – whether online or offline – has yet to be developed. A first step in this direction was taken by the OECD Expert Group on Government Relations with Citizens and Civil Society

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in 2002 with the collection of expert papers and examples of current practice of evaluation in OECD member countries (forthcoming).

Challenge No. 4 – Conducting evaluation

The challenge is to develop appropriate methods and tools for assessing the benefits and impacts of applying ICTs to citizen engagement in the policy process.

11. Building commitment for e-engagement at all levels

OECD guiding principle number 1 on "commitment" states (OECD, 2001, p. 15):

> *Leadership and strong commitment to information, consultation and active participation in policy-making is needed at all levels – from politicians, senior managers and public officials.*

This section considers how policy-makers in national government can build capacity and commitment by taking advantage of pilot projects being undertaken in parliaments and other public authorities.

Learning from local governments

There is much innovative work at local government level that national government should recognise and utilise. There are a growing number of examples of public authorities involved in innovative e-engagement pilots.

For example, much of the e-democracy work in Sweden has so far focused on the local level. Here there are several examples where public authorities have developed e-engagement systems in which citizens are able to send their views on various issues to the local authority website. All municipalities in Sweden have a website, even those with a relatively small population of around 3 000 inhabitants. Since 1999, 15% have had an online debate forum. A large number of the forums gave the citizens the possibility to set the agenda for the discussions. Some cities have dedicated forums for special issues, such as schools.

There are several reasons why e-democracy is focused on the local level in Sweden:

- Swedish municipalities are comparatively autonomous which gives local politics an important arena.
- Most experiments so far have taken place in small cities (*i.e.* greater than 25 000 inhabitants) or in districts in larger cities (for example, the City of Stockholm) where local districts have been given some autonomy.

- Experiments with some level of innovation are easier to start in smaller cities, where the democratic processes are less formal than in large ones, and certainly than at the national level.
- In physical planning it is compulsory to exhibit plans and allow citizen input. This is also a field in which several experiments with IT-supported local democracy have been conducted.

Other OECD member countries have indicated similar reasons for e-democracy pilots at the local government level.

Box 11.1. **Germany – The 2002 "e-community" competition**

When launching the "e-community" competition, the German Federal Minister of the Interior, Otto Schily, said, "With the competition, we wish to encourage local authorities, cities and counties to avail themselves of the options provided by the Internet by means of creative projects so as to rejuvenate democracy".

With this new prize, the Federal Ministry of the Interior will promote municipal participation concepts. With the prize of € 100 000 on offer, German cities, counties and municipalities will be given the opportunity to implement e-democracy projects. The deadline for project proposals was 31 October 2002 and the prize was to be awarded to three local authorities in December 2002. The e-community prize must be used for the implementation of project proposals submitted. The experience gained through their implementation will also benefit the e-democracy projects of other administrations.

Box 11.2. **The Netherlands – E-citizens in Amsterdam**

This is a one year experimental project where the districts/neighbourhoods involved will be able to follow one another's activities and learn from their own and each other's mistakes.

The project focuses on interactive policy making but not, primarily, on the associated ideological discussions. Its first priority is to explore the potential role of the Internet in shaping public decision-making processes and how this affects the relationships between citizens, public servants and administrators. The project has been implemented in Amsterdam at district level, in "Slotervaart" and "Noord", and at neighbourhood level, *e.g.* in the "Westerstaatsman" neighbourhood.

See: *www.eburgers.amsterdam.nl/index.htm*

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Box 11.3. **Sweden – Bollnäs: municipal community network**

Bollnäs is a small town of around 25 000 inhabitants in the middle of Sweden, some 250 km north of Stockholm. The e-engagment activities are not seen as projects but as part of the normal operations even though some activities are financed by special project funds attracted externally. Bollnäs has a plan for achieving what they call participatory democracy, which also includes plans for electronic voting and citizen panels. The city website contains quite a lot of information, both related to services and to politics. There are a number of e-engagement activities.

- Citizens can email the two municipal commissioners with a guarantee of an answer within a week.
- There is an online forum containing discussions on several pre-defined categories.
- City Council meetings are broadcast live on the Web and citizens can send questions via email during the break halfway through the meeting, which are answered after the break.

The champions for the e-engagement activities are the municipal commissioners and it is they who are the active politicians on the discussion forums. Some discussions have attracted "a large number of participants", by which is meant a couple of hundred people, *e.g.* a debate on whether a burned-down historic building should be reconstructed or not, which attracted 500 postings in the course of one month. However, some discussions have not turned out well, *e.g.* a discussion about taxes, which ended inconclusively.

See: *www.bollnas.se*

Box 11.4. **Sweden: Älvsjö – Citizen panel and other tools**

Älvsjö is a borough within the City of Stockholm with some independence and a local district council reflecting the political representation in the Stockholm City Hall. The Älvsjö e-democracy project started in 1997. The Älvsjö e-democracy efforts have been championed by the civil servants. The ideas and design have come from the administration. The politicians endorse the activities from the start, but have not taken active part as champions during the first years of operation. However since summer 2001 a group of politicians representing all parties was composed to handle the democracy issues. Älvsjö "e-democracy" Webpage has three main parts:

- The Citizen Panel (*Medborgarpanelen*), set up in Spring 2000, comprises 500 individuals, selected to represent the population by age, sex, and address. The panel uses online questionnaires.
- The Agora (*Medborgartorget*), is a discussion forum with several pre-defined topics, such as Elderly care, Democracy, Schools, and Environment. The activity of the different groups varies depending on whether the topic is a hot issue or not.
- The Citizen Proposal (*Medborgarförslaget*). Älvsjö inhabitants are allowed to make suggestions to the District Committee. Proposals can be made by email or by any other means. Citizens may volunteer to present their proposal in person to the Committee.

There have been some problems. One is that representiveness of the panel is gradually decreasing. It turned out to be very expensive to put the panel together in the first place, and thus every time this has do be done over again the District incurs a considerable cost. The e-democracy activities were originally started by civil servants, but they had become so popular that there was a need for more committed political involvement. Also, there was a need to assess the e-activities in comparison with other channels for communication. From a political perspective it seems worrying that the political parties do not have an important role in the development at local level. There is a small group of active politicians, but little involvement of the party organisations.

See: *www.Älvsjö.se*

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Box 11.5. **Italy – Municipality of Bologna**

The Municipality of Bologna is a leader in the delivery of public services online and of innovative services to the public. Their e-democracy project *www.comune.bologna.it/comune/istituti/index.html* was born of the need to explore new ways in which to promote the relationship between citizens and administration, so that citizens are able to actively participate in decisions affecting the daily life of the city, in an environment of administrative transparency and exchange of information. The project aims to publish certain administrative Acts of particular relevance on their website, "Iperbole", with the aim of requesting opinions on these Acts from citizens and at the same time opening a new space where ideas, questions, and suggestions can be proposed. These documents are usually long and complex and written in bureaucratic terms that are not always easily understandable. Each text is therefore accompanied by a summary abstract in "plain language", from which the citizen can decide whether to read the longer text and then eventually submit their own contribution on the topic to the dedicated area on the site. Citizens' opinions are able to be viewed by all users – internal and external – on the Iperbole website in specific pages for each Act.

See: *www.comune.bologna.it*

Box 11.6. **Sweden – Kista and the cybervote project**

In February 2002, Kista, a borough within the City of Stockholm, started the "Kista e-parliament", an effort to create a larger and more permanent online forum that could be addressed as a sort of citizen panel, *i.e.* with members who have agreed to participate on a more regular basis in the local development.

The e-parliament is an activity within Cybervote, which aims to develop and use secure voting technology, but also at putting some pressure on the process of changing legislation in EU Member States towards allowing electronic voting. The project will observe the changes in legislation that will be necessary to, over time, achieve similar voting procedures in all EU states. The Cybervote system will be tested during 2003 in local polls comprising some 3 000 people at each of the project sites in Germany, France and Sweden. The project works on the assumption that using electronic voting will help to improve democratic processes by increasing participation in election and polls.

See: *www.kista.stockholm.se*

Box 11.7. **Italy – Best Practice Repository**

To assist the promotion, planning and management of online services of local administrations – such as civic networks, public networks – the site *www.cittadigitali.it* aims to give greater visibility to the most innovative processes undertaken in the existing "digital cities". This site aims to collect best practices in the field of innovative use of technology in local administrations to aid the spread of knowledge and use of new methodologies. It is dedicated to the promoters and managers of local online services, public administrators, webmasters, various organisations of the Public Administration as well as experts, researchers and journalists. It uses an interactive database and a mono directional mailing list for the publication of papers and documents on the site. The site is built to correspond to the directives of the World Wide Web consortium so that it is accessible by most types of browsers, with slow connections and with tools which allow an alternative appreciation of the contents, such as vocal browsers for the blind. The site aims to collect information on various themes, provide updates on technological, economic and legal features and allow debate and participation on these from all users.

See: *www.cittadigitali.it*

Experience in national parliaments

With regard to parliaments, this report has already highlighted the use of webcasting for disseminating information by the Scottish Parliament and some of the work undertaken for the US Congress. Parliaments in other OECD member countries have also launched innovative initiatives to enhance citizens' access to information and participation through the use of new ICTs (see OECD, 2000a).

The **respective role of elected representatives and government employees** in e-engagement initiatives is still an open question. In particular it is useful for the role of government employees in the e-consultation to be made explicit. They need to understand whether they can respond to any online questions that arise during e-consultations, and whether they can address any misconceptions that are contained in comments.

In Canada the Centre for Collaborative Government and the Department of Canadian Heritage have been working together to explore key issues and assumptions associated with having government and elected officials as participants in e-consultations. They developed and tested the concept of a Digital Commons: a place where Canadians can openly discuss, debate and share issues and experiences electronically in an open forum.

An important outcome for the pilot was the strong relationship that developed throughout the process between elected officials and citizens. The evaluation found that although the majority of participants agreed that

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government should continue to support such e-engagement initiatives, opinions differed as to the roles of elected representatives and pubic servants in such online dialogue. It was felt that public servants should play a different role than elected representatives because they were government employees and this meant that they were restricted in what they could say.

On the other hand representatives could freely participate and speak their mind on a range of issues. However, exit interviews with representatives who were part of the project showed that they were not as enthusiastic and were concerned about a number of issues. These included the lack of any perceived direct benefit to them and their constituents and also the time it took to participate given the competing demands on their schedule.

Box 11.8. **Canada – Digital commons e-democracy pilot**

Thirty-five French and English speaking university students from across Canada, 6 senior public servants and 3 Members of Parliament participated in the Digital Commons – a bi-lingual discussion forum which used a complaints-based moderation. It was open for 3 weeks during which time two discussions took place, one concerning "the role of government as a participant in an online discussion" and the other "What is the Canadian way?"

During the pilot the public servants contributed least to the discussion, either because they were unsure about their role in the forum or because of their lack of IT literacy skills. The elected officials participated in a variety of ways. One of the three was very active in all areas of the discussion while the other two were less active on the site.

There is a need to survey local government and parliaments clearly characterise their major e-engagement initiatives and consider how national governments can build on and complement these activities. The global visibility of what is happening in other countries should help to highlight best practice in e-engagement, foster greater commitment and encourage others to adopt new techniques as appropriate.

Challenge No. 5 – Ensuring commitment

The challenge for government is to adapt structures and processes to ensure that the results of online consultations are analysed, disseminated and used. This commitment must be communicated widely, demonstrated in practice and validated regularly. Building commitment and capacity can benefit from the experience of local governments, parliaments and other countries.

12. Challenges for the future

Many of the challenges for the future are not of a strictly technological nature but are rather concerned with socio-economic issues. Frameworks that support the acceptance of e-engagement systems need to be developed in order to overcome the organisational and cultural barriers associated with introducing new ways of working.

In e-engagement there are a number of stakeholders that need to be introduced to the new technologies and new processes. These stakeholders include the elected representatives, government employees responsible for implementing policy, policy-makers, businesses, CSOs and citizens. Given this diverse range of stakeholders and the complex nature of governance it is necessary to look beyond the usual organisational and cultural barriers and place specific emphasis on the issues of privacy and trust.

So far this report has identified five main challenges and this section proposes to explore each one in more depth.

Challenge No. 1 – The problem of scale

Fishkin (1995, p. 80) argues that it is impossible to take the active engagement of citizens in a town hall setting concerned with local issues and transform this to a national meeting room – "a room of a million creates conditions for rational ignorance". In such a situation an individual citizen's opinion is unlikely to make a difference to the outcome. He concludes "It is simply another occasion for individuals to feel lost in the politics of mass society".

Citizen perspective

One approach to overcome this loss of identity is to design technology to support an individual to actively participate by giving him or her the electronic means to find others that share a similar point of view that can be developed further. There is a need for online chat rooms and discussion forums to be redesigned and implemented into virtual public spaces such that an individual's voice develops into a community (public) voice. Some OECD member countries have already developed non-ICT based tools to support consultation in communities.

Government perspective

From a government perspective, the challenge is how to listen to and respond to each individual. The challenge is huge, even at the local level, for example, how can the Greater London Authority relate to over 7 million Londoners and engage them in local policy-making? Fostering online communities and developing community-based e-engagement tools to

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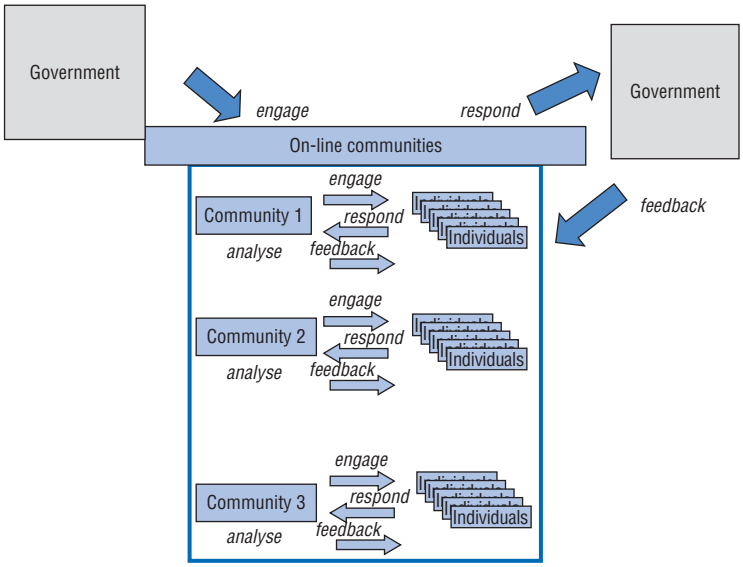
support such communities could be one way forward as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. **Building online communities**



There is a need to map perceptions related to e-engagement in a cross-section of communities in OECD member countries and to establish requirements for the design of community based e-engagement tools on the basis of the disparate needs of different types of communities.

Challenge No. 2 – Building capacity and active citizenship

Commentators (*e.g.* Hagen, 2000) have argued that civic education can help re-invigorate public discourse and so strengthen participation in the democratic process. However, the definition of civic education is open to debate.

Civic education for democracy, according to Barber (1984) can take at least three specific forms. The first of these is formal education in citizenship which includes teaching on a nation's constitution, legal system and political practice, he argues this is least useful for strong democracy. Secondly, private sphere social activity in which the focus is on debate affecting local issues, but he is concerned here about the parochial tendency of such education and it not extending outwards to national issues. The last form is participatory

politics itself, which he argues is the only completely successful form of civic education for democracy.

The politically edifying influence of participation has been noted a thousand times since first Rousseau and then Mill and de Tocqueville suggested that democracy was best taught by practicing it. (Barber, 1984, p. 235)

ICTs to enhance citizen engagement in the policy process provide both a challenge and an opportunity for civic education through such participation.

Fostering skills for deliberation

A number of commentators have argued the need for deliberation, *i.e.*, the importance of being immersed in competing arguments before being asked to make a decision. The challenge is **how to harness ICTs** to constructively encourage citizens into thinking about public issues and listening to, and engaging in, argument and counter arguments rather than simply asking questions. This indicates a requirement for acceptable and understandable information and the opportunity to debate issues through tools such as next generation mediated discussion forums.

There is also the challenge of engaging young people. The design of the e-engagement systems is critical to the success of engaging young people and also educating them about democratic decision-making. Young people are becoming used to using technology for "push-button" opinion polling, chat rooms for non-serious encounters with virtual friends and bulletin boards for posting one-off statements rather than engaging in debate. The challenge is to design the technology such that it supports exchange of opinion and facilitates responses from young people that show they have "listened" to the arguments and can incorporate these in their contributions.

Online tools for civic education

ICT-based tools could be developed to support education in active citizenship. Such tools would provide young people with an opportunity both to experience and to understand collective decision-making.

Collective decision-making can be viewed as a combination of the processes by which policy is developed on the basis of input from many individuals. Young people need to experience and understand these processes. Specifically they need to experience and understand:

- How individuals formulate personal points of view.
- How individuals articulate their personal point of view within the democratic institution to find groups of agreement.
- How individuals appreciate and accommodate other peoples' points of view.

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- How the collective/democratic institution aggregates all points of view.

E-engagement tools that provide young people with an opportunity both to participate in, and to understand, collective decision-making and active citizenship areneeded.

Challenge No. 3 – Ensuring coherence

The overarching challenge is for government to take an holistic view of the policy-making life cycle and explicitly incorporate procedures for ICT enabled citizen engagement with all that implies with respect to informing, consulting, participating, analysing, providing feedback and evaluating. Knowledge input at each policy-making stage must be made available appropriately at the other stages of the process so as to enable policy to be better formulated and citizens better informed. In order to take maximum advantage of the wealth of experience that citizens collectively possess, the whole of the policy-making process needs to be considered not just isolated decision points. The challenge is not just to conduct e-engagement but to ensure e-analysis and e-feedback.

Knowledge management

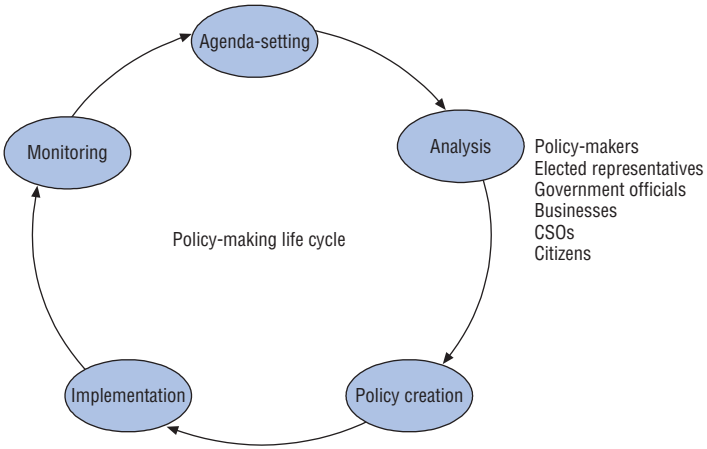
As stated earlier, as far as technology is concerned policy-making is a "wicked problem". It involves a large amount of knowledge that must be made explicit in different formats at each stage of the policy-making life cycle. This includes knowledge from many different sources, from policy-makers, government officials responsible for delivery of policy, elected representatives, businesses, CSOs and individuals. All this knowledge needs to be modelled and fed into the policy-making process. For maximum benefit to be made from citizens' contributions at all stages in the policy-making process, consideration should be given to addressing if, and to what extent, knowledge management, Computer Supported Collaborative Work (CSCW) and Computer Supported Collaborative Argumentation (CSCA) techniques could support the policy-making life cycle.

An example of an EU funded research and development project that is looking to provide a knowledge management infrastructure for policy-making is "e-power". This project is based in the Netherlands and the website is at: *www.lri.jur.uva.nl/research/epower.html*. One of the deliverables from the project will be an agreed shared vocabulary for regulations and legislation. A similar common vocabulary is required for policy-making to facilitate the design and development of integrated ICT tools.

Building a common vocabulary

To facilitate reliable communication both between stakeholders (see Figure 3) and between ICT-based systems a shared policy-making vocabulary needs to be developed. The challenge is to be able to share knowledge throughout the policy-making process.

Figure 3. **The policy life cycle: main steps and stakeholders**



On the left hand side of Figure 3 are the stages in the policy-making life cycle and the right hand side are the various stakeholders involved in policy-making. One or more of these stakeholders are involved either through being informed, being asked for input or by providing input into the various stages of the policy process. In order that they can be "understood" by one another, and in order to facilitate the technologists engaged in building appropriate support platforms, a formal, agreed, shared vocabulary (an ontology) of policy-making terms is required.

Some similar work in this area has been undertaken by various national parliaments and led by the European Parliament. The project is called ParlML: A Common Vocabulary for Parliamentary Language, initiated by the European Parliament's Task Force on Information and Document Management. One of the main objectives is to enable communication between computer systems in a way that is independent of the individual system technologies, information architectures and application domains.

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Challenge No. 4 – Conducting the evaluation of e-engagement

How can the benefits and the impacts of applying technology to the policy process be assessed? As governments increasingly support the development of ICTs to enable citizen engagement on policy-related matters there is correspondingly an increasing need to appreciate whether such electronic engagement meets citizens' and government's objectives. But how do we measure the impact and what do we measure?

Currently there is a clear **lack of an accepted framework** on how to evaluate and measure the impact of e-engagement systems. However, it is difficult to assess the impact of e-engagement systems on policy-making in a stand-alone context. To some extent at least, their influence on government work needs to be judged in comparison to the impact and success of existing off-line engagement tools. Empirical research is needed to evaluate e-engagement and make sense of what has, or has not, been achieved. There is a need to understand how to assess the benefits and the impacts of applying technology to the policy process.

One of the stated objectives of the Coleman and Gøtze report (2001, p. 20) is to examine the changes that elected politicians and policy makers need to make so as to adapt their practices to a more engaged and connected citizenry. They explicitly state:

> *Governments should not offer online consultation as a gimmick; they must be committed to integrating the evidence gathered into the policy process and being responsive.*

Lack of tools for evaluating public engagement "online" and "offline"

Although there has been considerable financial investment in the development of both off-line and online engagement tools, there has been no corresponding investment to date in evaluating the impact of this "enhanced" government to citizen relationship (OECD, 2001). While many evaluations of participation exercises have focused on "citizen satisfaction" surveys, the actual impact of citizens' contributions has not been widely researched and documented. Statements claiming that the quality of policy-making has been improved by such methods are usually not the result of a comprehensive analytical framework based on empirical evidence. In noting this gap in knowledge, the OECD (2001, p. 69) puts forward the following reason for lack of evaluation data:

> *One explanation for the lack of well-developed evaluation frameworks may well lie in the absence of clear goals on the part of government units when undertaking information, consultation and active participation.*

The assessment of **impact of e-engagement on policymaking** is a complex research question for a number of reasons. Firstly, as argued above, the effectiveness of traditional off-line consultations is itself not clear. The OECD's recent report says that: "No OECD country currently conducts a systematic evaluation of government performance in providing information, conducting consultation and engaging citizens in policy-making" (OECD, 2001, p. 13). Secondly, in making a rational assessment of e-engagement one has to overcome the prejudices put forward by two opposing outspoken groups. Wilhlem (2000) describes these groups as the neofuturists who champion the new technologies without considering the socio-economic constraints imposing barriers on their success and the dystopians who are too quick to criticise the technologies. Thirdly, the answer to the question does not fit easily along one single discipline but rather requires a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach. There is a need to merge political, technical and social evaluation perspectives.

To conclude, the lack of an accepted framework on how to measure the impact of e-engagement systems on policy is perhaps more understandable given that there is no clear methodological framework to evaluate democratic participation and its affect on policy in general. The impact of e-engagement systems may depend on and change current government practices in unforeseen ways, and it is important to consider how these changes affect our model of representative democracy.

Challenge No. 5 – Ensuring commitment

There is currently a real danger that while the use of e-engagement systems will expand significantly in the near future, the policy-making process will not be adapted to take advantage of these new avenues for citizen input. If governments put in place online initiatives to engage citizens, but continue with their old practices of policy-making they will risk generating widespread disillusionment.

Engaging citizens online raises legitimate expectations that public input will be used to inform policy-making. To respond effectively to such expectations, governments need to:

- **Adapt** their structures and policy-making processes to ensure that the results of online consultations are analysed, disseminated and used.
- **Ensure commitment and leadership** among political decision-makers and senior officials (*e.g.* by explaining the strengths and limits of available tools and the need for senior political figures to lead by example).
- **Communicate** this commitment widely (*e.g.* with policy documents or guidelines) and demonstrate it in practice (*e.g.* by having senior figures launch online consultations or participate in an online chat event).

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- **Validate** commitment on a regular basis (*e.g.* via annual reports, audits, parliamentary reviews).

There is much more that could be discussed, many more challenges that could be added and more innovations that could be described. However, it seems fitting to include here the question raised by Howard Rheingold taken from his interview by Powazek (2002, p. 296).

> *One of the other important things about democracy is not just about voting for your leaders, it's about intelligent conversation among citizens. And we've lost a lot of that communication in mass media. So a corollary to the question, will we see an emergence of literacy of netiquette is: will we see intelligent political discourse continue online and will it have an effect?*

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C. Lessons from Experience in OECD Member Countries

13. Country case studies of e-engagement

Building on the experience of others: local, national and international

Successful examples of online engagement of citizens in policy-making are still rare. Hence the need to build upon the experience of others when designing and launching online information, consultation and participation. This section considers how policy-makers in national government can take advantage of work being undertaken elsewhere – by public bodies at the local, national and international level.

However, we also note that any e-engagement system must be adapted to the culture and traditions of each OECD country. So we can expect to see much diversity in how this framework is used and how best practice guidelines are derived from it and applied in practice.

This section of the report aims to provide practical examples of how the opportunities, constraints and challenges of e-engagement may be addressed through concrete experiences drawn from OECD member countries. The case studies were provided by members of the OECD PUMA Expert Group on Government Relations with Citizens and Civil Society in mid-2002. While this set of 10 case studies represents only a small cross-section of the many ways in which public bodies are currently using new ICTs to inform, consult and engage citizens in policy-making, they help provide important insights into current practice. Using the analytical framework for e-engagement described in Table 2, each case study contains clear indications of:

- The relevant stage in the policy-making cycle.
- The government units and the target groups involved.
- Feedback received from participants.
- The specific technologies used.
- The main obstacles encountered.
- The key elements of success.

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Table 2. **Analytical framework for the comparative analysis of e-engagement**

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
	Agenda-setting	Analysis	Creating the policy	Implementing the policy	Monitoring the policy
Objective	Establishing the need for a policy or a change in policy and defining what the problem to be addressed is.	Defining the challenges and opportunities associated with an agenda item more clearly in order to produce a draft policy document.	Ensuring a good workable policy document.	Developing legislation, regulation, guidance, and a delivery plan.	This can involve evaluation and review of the policy in action.
Target audience	Business, CSOs, and individuals.	"Experts" on the subject matter, those likely to be affected by the policy and those staff who need to implement and enforce the policy; could be business, CSOs, individuals.	Experts on the subject matter, those likely to be affected by the policy and those staff who need to implement and enforce the policy; could be business, CSOs, individuals.	Those likely to be affected by the policy and those staff who need to implement and enforce the policy; could be business, CSOs, individuals.	All.
Technology-supported information	Search engines, email alerts for new policy issues, translation support for ethnic languages, style checkers to remove jargon.	Translation support for ethnic languages, style checkers to remove jargon.	Advanced style checking to help interpret technical and legal words.	Natural language style checkers.	Online feedback.
Technology-supported consultation	Online surveys and opinion polls, discussion forums, monitoring emails, bulletin boards and FAQs.	ICT to support the collection of "expert" statements, evidence-managed facilities, electronic citizen juries, expert profiling to assist government to know who the experts are.	Discussion forums, online citizen juries, e-community tools.	Discussion forums, online citizen juries, e-community tools.	Online surveys and opinion polls, discussion forums, monitoring emails, bulletin boards and FAQs.
Technology-supported participation	Individuals or groups of individuals gather support for a specific agenda item through such mechanisms as e-petitions, e-referenda, e-communities.	E-communities, electronic citizen juries.	E-petitions and e-referenda to amend policy.	Email distribution lists.	E-petitions, e-referenda.

Table 2. **Analytical framework for the comparative analysis of e-engagement** *(cont.)*

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
	Agenda-setting	Analysis	Creating the policy	Implementing the policy	Monitoring the policy
Issues and obstacles encountered	Risk of raising expectations that suggestions would become policy rather than providing input to government decision-making.	How to find the "experts" instead of the usual suspects.	How to ensure ordinary people that might be affected by the policy are aware of it and can understand.	Understanding the legislative terminology.	There is a need to rationally organise the collected data.
Opportunities, innovations and key elements of success	More open and transparent way of setting the agenda in which citizens can see whether items get taken forward.	Expert statements could be made more widely available enabling more transparency in the process.	Broader and wider acceptance of policy.	Transparency in implementing policy.	Transparency of implementation data, inspection reports, new information that could be fed into the policy process

Highlights

The 10 case studies in e-engagement presented here are extremely varied, covering different country contexts, levels of government, stages in the policy cycle, target groups and tools. While they are not amenable to comparative analysis, all of them address a core set of issues and the three key questions for online engagement of citizens in policy-making, namely: **When? Who?** and **How?**

When? The majority of the case studies describe e-engagement exercises at the **agenda-setting** stage of the policy cycle. This is not surprising given that this is early enough in the process to be most open to suggestions from citizens and is characterised by a significant degree of public deliberation – which the new ICT tools are designed to facilitate. It may also indicate the exploratory or experimental nature of these online initiatives, given that this is a stage where e-engagement will be most likely to complement, rather than disrupt, traditional methods for policy-making. A few case studies offer examples of online tools adapted for use at all stages of the policy cycle, with one illustrating e-engagement during policy formulation and another during monitoring. Whether the lack of examples during the analysis and implementation stages indicates that they are less amenable to e-engagement, or simply less widespread remains an open question.

Who? The case studies illustrate the wide range of public bodies now exploring the use of new ICTs to engage citizens in policy-making – from local governments, to national governments and parliaments as well as those operating at the intergovernmental or international level (*e.g.* European Commission). Clearly, the objectives, scope, and target groups of the e-engagement efforts undertaken by these bodies differ considerably. Nonetheless, they all offer valuable insights into the opportunities, dynamics and limits of online information, consultation and participation in policy-making. The **target groups** addressed also vary accordingly, and may include all citizens (*e.g.* within a given geographic area), all interested parties (*i.e.* independently of location) or specific sub-sections of the population (*e.g.* marginalised groups, businessmen, students).

How? Most case studies illustrate the importance of ensuring the **integration** of online and traditional methods for citizen engagement in policy-making. This is both in terms of providing information on the policy issue or e-engagement exercise itself (*e.g.* through posters, printed brochures, local press) and when providing a range of options for citizens to provide contributions (*e.g.* post, telephone, fax as well as email or co-ordinated traditional and online discussion fora). The specific technologies chosen for e-engagement varied in their degree of sophistication – most examples featured a dedicated website with email options. Others adopted specialised

software to manage online deliberation in their discussion forum or used password-protected discussion areas for registered users. The importance of ensuring competent and constructive moderation of online deliberations was also highlighted.

Methodology

An "e-engagement matrix" providing a number of concrete examples of ICT tools for information, consultation and participation in policy-making was extracted from the analytical framework. This aimed to provide guidance to member countries in the selection of promising practices and recent experience in this emerging field. The examples provided are indicative and do not represent an exhaustive list – nor do all of these tools feature in the country case studies (see Table 3 below).

Table 3. **E-engagement matrix**

Stage in policy-making cycle	Information	Consultation	Participation
Agenda-setting	Search engines, e-mail alerts for new policy issues, translation support for ethnic languages, style checkers to remove jargon.	Online surveys and opinion polls, discussion forums, monitoring emails, bulletin boards and FAQs.	E-petitions, e-referenda, e-communities.
Analysis	Translation support for ethnic languages, style checkers to remove jargon.	Evidence-managed facilities, expert profiling to assist government to know who the experts are.	Electronic citizen juries, e-communities.
Formulation	Advanced style checking to help interpret technical and legal terms.	Discussion forums, online citizen juries, e-community tools.	E-petitions and e-referenda to amend policy.
Implementation	Natural language style checkers, e-mail newsletters.	Discussion forums, online citizen juries, e-community tools.	E-mail distribution lists for target groups
Monitoring	Online feedback.	Online surveys and opinion polls, discussion forums, monitoring emails, bulletin boards and FAQs.	E-petitions, e-referenda.

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FINLAND
Share Your Views with Us

Description:

In April 1998 the Finnish Government passed a resolution "High-Quality Services, Good Governance and a Responsible Civic Society" on Governance Policy. In this resolution the Government stated that participation will be increased on all levels of government. The resolution led to different projects being started. One of them was a project the Ministry of Finance launched in November 1999. The purpose of the project was to improve citizens' possibilities to influence policy making of the state government by means of ICT. The project consisted of three different dimensions. One of them was a project to develop the discussion forum *www.otakantaa.fi* (otakantaa = share your views with us) on the Internet where citizens could comment and give their views of issues that are under preparation in the ministries. The basic idea in the *www.otakantaa.fi* Internet discussion forum was to create a platform for individual citizens to be consulted on issues of central government that are in the early stages of preparation.

At any given moment, there are 2 to 6 discussions going on in the forum. On the front page there is a short introduction to the issue being discussed and with one click you can enter the discussion you choose and make a new comment or comment on what somebody else has said earlier.

Besides these discussions there is of course also background material and links on the otakantaa Web pages. The idea has been that citizens can get acquainted with the issues being discussed. The background material includes also the archives of the previous discussions where one can also find summaries of the discussions. The background material has, of course, varied according to the issues being discussed. The otakantaa Web pages have been able to benefit from the fact that there is in Finland a quite advanced register on projects and legal preparatory documents that has been possible to link to the Share Your Views with Us -pages to provide information to citizens about projects going on in the state administration.

Stage in the policy-making cycle

Agenda-setting. In the discussion forum it is important to determine which issues are to be discussed. There has to be a balance between what issues are

being prepared by government and what issues are the most interesting ones from the citizens' point of view. The connection to the issues being prepared is an essential principle, because only then it can be guaranteed to the citizens that their comments will be taken into account. This does not, of course, mean that all the ideas became decisions, but the discussions are gone through and used in the preparatory work. This means that the forum should be an integral part of the government preparatory process. One basic principle to support this is that a summary is made from each discussion and this summary follows the issue or project in its later preparatory phases. It is important that the citizens feel that it is meaningful to participate in the discussions. The *www.otakantaa.fi* discussion forum is not however a place where every comment should, or needs to, be answered. The emphasis is on discussion. It is not a question and answer site.

Target groups involved

The forum is for individual citizens and from the very beginning it was decided that they can write to the forum anonymously if they wish. The principle in the discussion forum has been that it is open to every citizen so that no registration is needed beforehand. During the two years the forum has been operating, only an extremely small number of inappropriate comments have had to be removed by the moderators.

Government units

Line ministries, co-ordinated by the Ministry of Finance. The civil servants use their own names and the initials of their ministry when taking part in the discussions.

Specific technologies used

From the very beginning the forum's technical design and functioning has been contracted out to a private company. At this moment in the forum's second phase the responsibility for the forum is divided between the technical supplier, Ministry of Finance and the line ministries.

The Ministry of Finance provides the other ministries with the forum for their use. The Ministry's Public Management department is responsible for the general maintenance, for the basic principles of the forum, for marketing and running the forum in general, the coordination and cooperation between the ministries, acting as a link between the ministries and the technical supplier as well as developing the forum further. The Ministry of Finance has a network of people – mainly drawn from information offices – from each ministry to support the coordination, marketing and development of the forum.

The ministries are in charge of the actual running of the forum. They choose the issues that are put on the forum for discussion. The ministries' civil servants in charge of the issues discussed in the forum will be the ones

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moderating the discussion. The ministries are, of course, also in charge of: *a*) providing the forum with background material on the issues being discussed; *b*) marketing the forum to their own shareholders and for arranging the online discussions with their own ministers; *c*) making a summary to be published on the otakantaa-pages and taking the conversation into account in their preparatory work on the issues.

The technical supplier (Mogul Finland Ltd) is in charge of the technical functioning of the forum and of the technical assistance needed for the online discussions.

Main obstacles encountered

None stated.

Innovations and key elements of success

Citizens are not the only ones to participate in discussions in the forum, civil servants also do. The civil servants have the possibility and responsibility to comment and give feedback to the discussion. This way the citizens providing comments get feedback as well.

Besides the online discussions there are also "chat" sessions where, for one or two hours, a Cabinet minister is on line answering the questions citizens pose to him or her during that period. It was felt that it is important that citizens also have this possibility to discuss issues with the minister himself/herself online. Normally 2 to 4 such sessions are arranged per month. People who are not able to attend at that particular time can send questions before hand by a form offered at the otakantaa Web pages. After the session they can read the answer to their question in the archives where the online discussion appears only minutes after it has ended.

One area of managing the forum that is very important has been its promotion. Since this is a government project, the resources for promoting it are very scarce. But it has been necessary to do as much marketing as possible so that people are aware first of all that such forum exists and secondly what is currently going on in the forum so that citizens know when there are new questions and online sessions.

The forum got publicity quite nicely in the beginning but the best marketing situation appeared when a question was put on the forum "Tell Mr. Sailas where the state should make savings". Mr Sailas is the Secretary of State of the Ministry of Finance and a very well known figure in Finnish society. This question caught the attention of the citizens as well as the press and the address of the site (*www.otakantaa.fi*) became familiar. The question was not however a marketing act in itself. Mr Sailas read through all the comments and suggestions and forwarded them to the civil servants responsible for preparing the budget. But the question also worked well in terms of marketing the forum.

The forum relies very much on the cooperation of the ministries. There is no norm or legislation that would oblige them to take part in the forum. Currently it is up to the ministries to decide which projects they put up on the discussion forum to be discussed by the citizens. In the future the idea is that all projects to be launched will be on the forum, but even then it seems unlikely that there will be a formal obligation to do so. It can be said that the forum operates more on the basis of cooperation as well as moral pressure towards ministries to have their projects discussed by citizens and the results used and feedback given to citizens.

There is no obligation either for the ministries to use only this site. They can establish their own discussion forums if they feel that it is a better way for them. So far, however, ministries have been pleased that there is a ready-made tool for them to use and that they do not have to solve the same questions that have already been solved when launching this site.

The legislation that is probably most relevant to the Share Your Views With Us Web pages is the 1999 Finnish Act on the Openness of Government activities, even though the forum is in no way directly linked to the Act. The Act emphasises that is important that citizens also receive information of the preparatory phase of issues and that is exactly what the discussion forum aims to support.

Future plans

During the two years the discussion forum *www.otakantaa.fi* has been operating it has proven to be worth continuing. It was revised in March 2001 to act as a common platform for the ministries for the purpose of hearing citizens. However, there are many points in which it is necessary to develop it further. For this development work it was been decided that the forum will continue as a pilot project until September 2002. The forum will become permanent from late 2002 or early 2003.

The plans for the future are that the forum will have its own editor-in-chief and editorial staff that will coordinate the questions being discussed in the forum. The idea is that these editors will cooperate with the ministries so that all projects will be in the forum to be discussed and that there will be more questions that are horizontal. At the moment the questions are most often from one ministry's field but in the future, hopefully, the trend will be more towards cross-sectoral approach with several ministries acting as moderators at the same time.

Since the name of the forum "*www.otakantaa.fi*" is relatively well known, it was considered important to keep it in the future. Different ministries have had some pressure to set up their own forums and this common forum already in action was seen as a good solution. This way citizens know the address at which to find the forum and the ministries do not have to set up,

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Table 4. **Goals and indicators for the "Share your views with us" website**

Goals	Indicators
Increase citizen discussions of state government projects.	Number of discussions.
Projects in Government's strategic portfolio are brought into the discussion forum.	The percentage of projects in the discussion forum of all the projects in the portfolio.
Discussions are from all state government sectors.	Statistics of discussions by ministries.
Cross-sectoral preparation of issues increases.	Number of discussions moderated by several ministries.
To get citizens interested in developing the society.	Number of comments.
To get civil servants interested in using the citizen's knowledge.	Number of comments from civil servants.
Topics in discussion forum increase the civic debate at large.	Press follow-ups. 1) How the discussions are quoted in the media. 2) How the topics are further discussed in the media.
Assessment of the influence of discussion forum to the decision-making.	Yearly case study.
Citizens can reach the ministers regularly.	Number of online discussions.

and promote, their own forums with different Web addresses. Some primary targets and simple indicators have been set up for the future of the discussion forum.

The forum was set up as a development project and though it is being made permanent, the principle behind it is that it has been constantly developed. Electronic forums are a relatively new phenomenon in the public sector and therefore new lessons are learned all the time, new ideas emerge as do new techniques that help to develop the forum even further.

Website: *www.otakantaa.fi*

THE NETHERLANDS
E-consultation on the future of food

Description

The digital debate on the "Future of Food" was a bilingual, joint initiative of the Dutch and German ministries of Agriculture to encourage a joint debate with all parties concerned about the future of agriculture and horticulture in both countries. In parallel with the digital debate, workshops were organised in both countries with key actors, and results were used as input for the digital debate. The findings of the workshops and the debate were collected in a publication that was presented to the European ministers of Agriculture at the "Grüne Woche" (the Green Week) in Berlin in January 2002. The digital debate was held in three rounds over a period of six weeks. The first theme – safe food – ran the longest. The views and propositions put forward in the debate were seen by the Ministry as a valuable enrichment of the dialogue between the ministry and the relevant actors.

Stage in the policy-making cycle

Agenda-setting.

Government units

Ministry of Agriculture Nature Management and Fisheries (The Netherlands) and Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Agriculture and Food (Germany).

Target groups involved

Citizens, farmers, businesses.

Feedback received from participants

500 contributions to the actual debate and 20 000 individual visitors to the website.

Specific technologies used

Commercially available software – Voices Choices and Votes Quotes from United Knowledge (*www.unitedknowledge.nl*). Voices Choices is a debating application that enables a debate in several rounds. Debates can be phased and background information can be provided. Votes Quotes is an opinion survey application that can be filled in by the moderator, as desired. Both

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applications can easily be adapted by the moderator using a separate moderator page, making it a user-friendly application.

Main obstacles encountered

None stated.

Innovations and key elements of success

The debate was bilingual. Contributions were translated to facilitate the discussion between Dutch and German participants. There was an intensive focus on publicity and attention from target groups with visible commitment on the part of Ministers. The kick-off meeting was organised with the Dutch and German Ministers of Agriculture.

Debate was held over several rounds and no debate was allowed to continue too long. There was constructive cooperation between ministries and facilitating organisation. A separate project organisation was set up for the purpose. There was transparency concerning the end product and how results are to be used in practice. The exercise provided a good example of how to integrate online and traditional tools for consultation.

Website: *www.future-of-food.org*

SWEDEN
Kalix: annual consultation

Description

Kalix is a town of 20 000 inhabitants in the very far north of Sweden. The first Kalix Consultation, on the remodeling of the city center, took place in September 2000. It got a lot of attention in the press, not only in Sweden but also internationally. Since then, there has been a second consultation dealing with tax levels, in October 2001, and there are plans to make it an annual event.

Starting in 1998, the work in the City Hall has been complemented by a network organisation which means people in different departments working with similar issues are cooperating. The thrust is to make the political will able to influence work in the City Hall at an earlier stage. In the first consultation, on city planning, the questions were rather open, such as whether there was a need to improve conditions for pedestrians and cyclists (the bike is an important means of transportation in most Swedish cities) or not, rather than suggesting specific solutions such as separate bike roads. There were no elaborate alternatives to vote for or against, and the political parties had not yet committed to any policies. There was also no discussion about costs. Questions were sent by ordinary mail to inhabitants. Everyone also received a password that could only be used once.

The second consultation was more like a traditional public vote as it had three specific alternatives – raised taxes, lowered taxes, or taxes kept at the current level. There were ample opportunities for debate on the Internet by means of chat and mail, and in person at public physical meetings. Voting could take place from a computer in the home, at work, or in public places such as libraries, homes for the elderly and Internet cafés in the villages. Views and responses could also be delivered by ordinary mail, telephone or fax.

Stage in the policy-making cycle

Agenda-setting.

Government units

The local municipality of Kalix.

Target groups involved

All citizens able to vote in Kalix.

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Feedback received from participants

The first consultation saw the participation of 1 200 persons, or 7% of the Kalix population. The second consultation attracted an even more impressive 51% of those entitled to vote.

Specific technologies used

The consultation was implemented with the help of a consultant company, Votia, specialised in conducting consultations. Information to the citizens was largely provided by the Web, but also in traditional meetings and in the local press.

Main obstacles encountered

The feedback illustrates one dilemma of "strong" democracy – an active minority achieves an influence far beyond their number. In the first consultation, participation was only 7%. Whether this should be seen as a problem of representativeness or a call for those who did not participate to do so next time is a matter of interpretation. There are no guidelines in the literature on "strong" or "participatory" democracy to indicate how much participation is "enough". The literature provides very little help for those who want to find ways to measure participation.

Innovations and key elements of success

The Kalix politicians went for a positive interpretation. They compared the participation with the standard participation in city planning issues, which is typically closer to 10 people than anything near the figures achieved for these consultations. Also, the second consultation was promptly followed by a decision in the political assembly following the outcome of the popular vote. On the other hand, this time there was already in advance a publicly stated opinion among the political majority that this was their view.

Website: *www.kalix.se*

SWEDEN
Electronic dialogue at Norrmalm District Council

Description:

The district of Norrmalm in central Stockholm has a total of 61 000 inhabitants. The population is relatively young with 25 000 residents between the ages of 25 and 44. The southern part of the district is dominated by offices and shops. There are an estimated 100 000 or so visitors daily.

During 2001, two e-consultations were held. In September, citizens were invited to present proposals for improvements in Vasa Park – the heart and lungs of Vasastan, the north-western district of central Stockholm. Since new homes and offices are to be built in the area where the park is located, funds have been allocated for a refurbishment of the park.

Stage in the policy-making cycle

Agenda-setting.

Government units

District of Norrmalm Council and Administration (City of Stockholm).

Target groups involved

Residents and visitors to Norrmalm.

Feedback

Some 1 700 people participated in this consultation in one way or another. Roughly half of these did so by means of an online questionnaire and a box which they could fill in their suggestions. The other half took part through postal questionnaires, letters, fax and telephone. The consultation gave rise to a great number of suggestions as to the possible nature of the refurbishment, and the citizens' replies to the questionnaire permitted conclusions to be drawn regarding the public's priorities.

The outcome of the consultation was published eight weeks after its conclusion, and this document then formed the basis of subsequent work to implement the proposals. A project leader, responsible for following up the meeting, has started collaborating with other municipal administrations involved. During summer 2002, landscape architects are presenting their final proposals for park design, based on the intentions of the consultation, and the

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question will then be raised in the District Council, the Building, Streets and Traffic Committee and the Sports Committee.

Specific technologies used

The Public Access Tool.

Stage 1 – Opening up

In 1999, Norrmalm District Council initiated an Internet-based service providing access for citizens and other website visitors to all the documents involved in the district council's work. For example, invitations, complete with the agenda, to the next council meeting – which is open to the public, and where in the first part of the session the public are entitled to pose questions to the politicians – can obtained here. Proposed decisions to be presented to the council, "official statements" as they are called, are also published. After every council meeting, the minutes are published. These contain all the decisions, reservations and special statements made. This tool, known as "Public Access", has given the citizens an entirely new opportunity for familiarising themselves with the council's work. It has paved the way for greater interest in democracy and influence at local level. Parallel to this, the citizens were also given a chance to present their suggestions direct to the council on issues that concern them. During the first four years, 200 citizens' suggestions were dealt within the council and some 70 of these were implemented, in whole or in part, after the administration had first been instructed by the council to draft proposals. Most of the citizens' suggestions are submitted on the Internet.

Stage 2 – Enhancing dialogue

During the year 2000, the next step was taken in the work of enhancing dialogue with the citizens. In co-operation with the two Administration officers responsible for issuing information, politicians in the drafting committee on "Democracy and Freedom of Choice", which had existed since 1997, drew up a second version of the Public Access tool. In this new version, the emphasis was on interactivity. Three new interactive services were devised to enhance the dialogue between politicians and citizens. Originally, Public Access was solely an administrative tool that made it easier for citizens to obtain information about political decisions. Now, the site visitor can apply for the following Public Access services:

- **Agent**
  Since the District Council's work extends over many spheres of activity, including pre-school and school education, care of the disabled and elderly, social care and matters relating to parks and streets, citizens need to be able to find their way around the numerous activities in progress. With the agent's help, using a search engine, site visitors can now type in the areas

that interest them. They can, for example, insert the name of the street they live in; as soon as one of the Council's incoming documents or cases contains this street name the citizen receives an e-mail with a direct link to the document in question. In this way, the individual's personal interests govern the flow of information. The search words for issues they wish to follow are written in free text, and all the citizens can both stay informed about their personal priority issues and participate in debate, in a highly time-effective and convenient way. The agent searches in all the Council's documents, agendas, debates and minutes.

- **Debate**
  Before every meeting with the Council, roughly a week in advance, all the questions and draft proposals are published. During this week, the public can present their views. It is the politicians themselves who engage in this debate. This means that citizens' views are included in the preparation of the case: accordingly, they have genuine opportunities of conveying their opinions to the politicians before decisions are taken.
- **Public consultation**
  The third service includes a function whereby, two to four times a year, citizens are invited to attend a public consultation on a current and pressing matter. Since members of the public register their postal address when they log in, they receive an invitation as soon as a new consultation is initiated.

Innovations and key elements of success:

The citizens' scope for influence has been enhanced by the district of Norrmalm's way of devising tools for grass-roots democracy in the dialogue between politicians and the public. The citizens' opportunity for making suggestions has yielded favourable results, and several district councils in Stockholm have adopted the Norrmalm model. Other municipalities in Sweden have also approached Norrmalm on this matter.

Around 2 500 citizens have participated in three public consultations that have been held. This is a good result compared with similar consultations implemented in Sweden.

One key reason why Norrmalm District Council has succeeded so well in its ambitions is that the politicians themselves took part in designing the e-engagement tools described above. Drawing up the specification of requirements, which was addressed to the external Internet firm engaged for the technical systems, was carried out by politicians and officials jointly. This meant that it was the politicians who imposed the limit as what spare-time politicians have time for when it comes to the dialogue with citizens. This starting point is important if e-democratic efforts are to be successful in the future.

Website: *www.norrmalm.stockholm.se*

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ITALY
Municipality of Bologna: DEMOS Project

Description

This is an e-consultation on the subject of traffic in Bologna, which was piloted from 10 January to 20 February 2002, allowing the participation of all *Iperboliani* – users who have registered for e mail addresses from the Municipality of Bologna's website called Iperbole. The choice was made to restrict participation by invitation to these 18 000 users to more easily control the discussion and possible abuse of the system. The discussion was divided into three phases which lasted for six weeks. The first was for the establishment of main arguments through the use of a large scale discussion in a central forum. The phase concluded with a survey of the main points which prepared the second phase, where the discussion was structured into five sub forums. Citizens were able to participate in discussions in the five sub forums to make comments and propose solutions. At the end of the second phase, the moderators produced a final document, outlining the conclusions reached, for discussion in the central forum in the third concluding phase. This saw the five sub forums reintegrated into the central forum where these conclusions are discussed by all. Here, citizens had their last chance to defend their positions against the opinions of others. The result of the last survey into the arguments discussed was the basis for the final document which will incorporate a synthesis of the results of the entire discussion process.

Stage in the policy-making cycle

The DEMOS project aims to use discussion forums at each stage of the policy making process, specifically in agenda-setting, consultation and participation, analysis consultation and formulation consultation.

Government units

The Traffic Sector of the Municipality of Bologna was involved together with the Sector for Citizen Information.

Target groups involved

The discussion on traffic involves nearly all sectors of the community, in finding ways in which to reconcile the need to respect the environment with the need to allow efficient and satisfactory mobility in the city.

Feedback

362 users registered on the DEMOS project and 713 messages were sent to the forum. The themes touched upon vary from the construction of a metro system to the number of traffic wardens. The presence of a parallel forum – Traffic in Bologna Feedback – allows citizens to comment on the project and to suggest improvements and amendments. The administrators of the project took these views into account and used them to improve the model. The feedback was on the most part positive.

Specific technologies used

Software for the management of discussion forums was used. The system offers a Web interface which includes Java configurable software. A personal area is available on the site which allows users to keep bookmarks, messages and preferences so that they are able to communicate also with another single user. An archive of documents was available together with the use of an internal search engine and updates on the home page. Online surveys could also be completed, to provide the necessary results for correct opinion making and for the creation of new forums.

Obstacles

The innovative aspect of this tool of democratic participation needs time to be assimilated and accepted and thus implies that the initial numbers of participants are not particularly high. The need to have Internet access is principal to the DEMOS project and the financial cost of connection to the Internet incurred by the home user, without there being an immediate incentive, is also a prohibitive aspect. Workstations are available at the "front office" of Iperbole but the majority of users prefer to access the Web from home. Internally, it is necessary to constantly encourage the participation and involvement of other sectors of the Council in the project. It is essential to have effective and efficient collaboration in order to be able to reply to the comments of the forum participants.

Key elements of success

For the success of this project, it is necessary to ensure that the three phases of the discussion are well structured and delineated to avoid dispersion of the contents. The need to be able to launch on line surveys and to obtain immediate results and thus to have fully functioning software, the need for expert involvement and the use of the Delphi mediation system were essential. A filter for inappropriate language and a chart of the major participants of the forum was also necessary for the success of the project. In summary, the key elements of success were the willingness of citizens to participate in the project and to remain dedicated to it for its entire duration.

Website: *www.comune.bologna.it*

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ITALY
Municipality of Cesena PEG online

Description

The Project of the Municipality of Cesena *www.comune.cesena.fc.it* concerns publishing their objectives plan (the PEG) for 2001 on the council website and providing a feedback questionnaire. The aim of the project is to allow the citizen to be aware of the governing strategy adopted by the administration and to comment on it during the year, to allow it to be changed, adapted and to prepare for future years. The PEG is the tool which is used by the Council (or "Giunta" – the political organ) at the beginning of the governing year to set out the objectives and the human and financial resources necessary to achieve them. Once the PEG has been approved, it passes to the organisational and administrative organs (directors, officials and other council workers) whose work it is to implement the plan. At the end of the year, the Council and the Assessing body will verify the results achieved against the objectives set and are able to reward the directors and officials for their performance. Through the publication of the PEG online *www.comune.cesena.fc.it/Organizzazione/Peg2002/index.html* and of a questionnaire for citizens to fill out on every single objective set, local government becomes more open and allows citizens to actively participate and comment on the policies and directives. It is hoped that citizens through this will become more aware of the strategies and concrete actions taken by the local government, that a direct dialogue can be engaged in "real time" on the policies and political plan of the governing body, that online customer satisfaction and customer analysis surveys can be consulted on the current and actual achievement of objectives. Finally, that the citizen can express his or her opinion on the actions taken by the council in order that these actions can be modified, adapted or changed throughout the course of the year.

Stage in the policy-making cycle

Monitoring. The questionnaires on every single objective set in each sector are specific and are used to shape and change the PEG throughout the course of the year, so it is an ongoing activity. Of all the stages in the policy making process, it is probably more fitted to the monitoring stage, although the opinions and ideas expressed are then used in the formulation of the following year's plan too. The citizen's questionnaires are collected and

analysed by the office of management control who prepares a report based on the data collected in terms of citizens' opinions on objectives that were not in line with the administrative programme declared by the Mayor, objectives that citizens did not feel were met during the year, and proposals for new objectives. The report is prepared for the Council and the general management of the council so that they are able to use the results to carry out realignment to shape and alter the plan during the course of the year (feedback), use the results to shape the next year's plan (agenda-setting) and to redefine future programmes and projects (strategic planning and strategic control).

Government units

Municipality of Cesena. In 2001, 291 objectives were set, for a budget of *circa* 180 hundred million lire which involved 23 sectors of the council, 20 directors of units, 700 council staff, and 85 cost centres.

Target groups involved

The target group is the citizens themselves, who have an opportunity to comment on the objectives set in each area of activity of the local council. This is a first and decisive step towards e-democracy and e-consultation allowing each citizen to verify if the promises made in the electoral declaration are actually being kept. The portal also offers the possibility of engaging in dialogue with the citizen, who is able to comment directly on the objectives set and achieved for the sector or sectors in which he/she is interested.

Feedback

Feedback from citizens was excellent, so much so that the PEG for 2002 is now also published on line and the project is being repeated, thanks to the success of the last one for 2001.

Specific technologies used

The project began in late 2000 with the design of specific software for the setting out of the PEG which, up to then, had only been prepared in paper form. Investment in ICT was by that stage inevitable given the strategic dimensions of the activity carried out by the council and by the wealth of information necessary needed to monitor it. Feedback questionnaires were used, as well as possibilities to send emails direct to the council.

Obstacles

The major obstacles met lay in the fact that citizens who are Internet users are only one part of the population of the council area and are therefore not wholly representative, especially excluding the older and less economically comfortable sectors of the community, as well as immigrants who have no access to the Internet. The PEG also sets objectives in every single

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sector which can be very specific to the area concerned. Each objective should have a well-defined target group and a specifically compiled questionnaire.

Key elements of success

A key element of success is the effective planning of the PEG and the use of technology to make it clear and simple for publication on line. In order to render this system even more efficient it will be necessary to define different ways of participation in relation to the various target groups for each sector of activity of the council. It is currently under examination to distribute a paper questionnaire so that all citizens can participate, and to create an online forum of members who have signed up to a specific mailing list and to distribute a newsletter to specific sectors of the community who might be interested by the objectives set in various sectors. Overall, more targeting will be employed in order to render the project even more effective.

Website: *www.comune.cesena.fc.it*

AUSTRALIA
Defence Review 2000

Description

The Defence Review 2000 was a major examination by the Australian Government of its defence policy. An extensive consultation process was carried out in July, August and September 2000 as part of Defence Review 2000, and allowed the Australian people to have their say on the shape of Australia's future defence. The consultation process comprised a number of public meetings and an online consultation facility. A consultation page was established on the Department of Defence website which provided a range of information about the consultation process, including an electronic consultation kit. The consultations gave all Australians – civilians and Defence personnel, individuals and organisations – the opportunity to make their views known to the Government. The consultation team also received a number of submissions from other countries. These views were taken into consideration for the Government's new Defence policy White Paper, a major statement to help determine the future direction of Australia's defence forces.

Stage in the policy-making cycle

Policy formulation. The Defence Review 2000 e-consultation was a process of consultation at the policy formulation stage, with the site at *www.defence.gov.au/consultation2/index.htm* providing key documents and information about the development of the Defence White Paper, as well as a facility for citizens to input their submissions to the review online.

Government units

The Commonwealth Department of Defence conducted the consultation.

Target groups involved

Any interested parties.

Feedback

Over 1 100 submissions were received, with over 80% from individuals and the remainder from industry and community organisations. Additionally, 5 300 emails were received in the consultation period. In terms of the tone and characteristics of feedback received, the report of the consultation states that "The vast majority of those who participated in the meetings or submitted

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their views were positive about the process and keen to participate and build on the initiative. The predominant view was that the process was a positive step in policy development."

Specific technologies used

No specific technologies were used for the e-consultation. An email address was provided for citizen submissions, and copies of the discussion paper were made available as pdf files or as text files.

Obstacles

The final report of the consultation does not identify any specific obstacles to the process, but it is clear that there was a great diversity of opinion and perspectives in the submissions received, as well as a high volume of traffic.

Website: *www.defence.gov.au/consultation2/* Copies of the final report are available from the site in Web, PDF and text formats.

UNITED KINGDOM
Online Parliamentary inquiry into Domestic Violence

Description

There have been a number of online consultations in the UK Parliament. In March 2000 the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence held an online consultation with survivors of domestic violence. The purpose was to allow women who had lived with domestic violence to give direct evidence to a group of MPs who were investigating the subject. This was a groundbreaking initiative that used ICTs effectively to open up the parliamentary process to a group of people whose voices are rarely heard. The consultation was run in partnership with the Hansard Society; an independent educational charity which seeks to promote effective parliamentary democracy. The e-consultation method:

- The discussion ran for one month (from 1 March-1 April 2000). The process of locating and registering women to participate started five months before the launch of the consultation and was carried out by workers from women's groups and refuge centres. Participants had to register to receive a user name and a password that allowed them to access the secure discussion forum ("Womenspeak"). MPs were also issued with passwords giving them access to this area.
- The website that hosted the online discussion used a clear and welcoming design and was user-friendly. It provided an explanation of the consultation, other relevant information about the policy area and links to organisations. The interactive aspect of the website allowed women to post messages directly onto the site or to simply read others' contributions.
- Access to technology – each refuge or women's centre took responsibility for providing the women participating with sufficient computers at their premises or arranging access points at nearby public buildings
- A set of opening questions was posted at the launch of the consultation, developed by key stakeholders and the consultation's advisory group, addressing the main areas within domestic violence. Although the questions were intended to focus discussion, it did not prevent participants from raising other issues.
- An independent moderator monitored discussions and added relevant information to the website.

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Stage in the policy-making cycle

Agenda-setting. The consultation involved the public in the agenda-setting stage of the UK policy-making cycle. Participants were aware that they were giving evidence to a parliamentary inquiry and could have an effect upon the policy making process.

Government units

The consultation involved an All Party Parliamentary Group – a cross party assembly of parliamentarians with an interest in the specific issue.

Target groups involved

The consultation was designed to meet the needs of the target audience, women who were survivors of domestic violence. It successfully reached women from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. As many of the target group had no experience of the Internet and were vulnerable because of their circumstances, the organisers provided training and support, a safe place to access the Internet, and security within the discussion area of the website. These were important factors in making the consultation a success.

Feedback

A total of 199 women logged on, posting a total of 960 messages. The consultation informed the work of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence. The results were summarised in a report prepared by the Hansard Society and presented to the UK's Minister for Women, Tessa Jowell. In Parliament, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair MP was asked whether he had heard about the consultation and he responded positively. The consultation highlighted the experience of survivors of domestic violence in a direct and powerful way and allowed them to communicate directly with parliamentarians and policy makers.

Satisfaction with the consultation was gathered via a survey, made available online and in paper format. Organisers received positive feedback from participants about the consultation:

- The vast majority (94%) said that the consultation was a worthwhile exercise.
- Most (92%) felt that they had learnt something from each other's contributions.
- Over three quarters (78%) said it was easy to follow the discussion.

The feedback demonstrates that the online consultation enabled the women participating to share their experiences of domestic violence with women in similar situations. The Internet provided a safe and secure forum for this discussion to take place.

There was some dissatisfaction among participants about input from MPs – over one third (39%) were not satisfied with the contributions from MP. Despite some of the negative comments on the participation of the MPs, most MPs found it a valuable exercise, in terms of the unique insight and in-depth information it provided them, over a period of one month, on the experiences of women who had lived with domestic violence. The exercise was also recognised for offering a new and effective way of gathering evidence from a traditionally marginalised group of people.

Specific technologies used

Dedicated website site and closed online discussion forum.

Key elements of success

Independent moderator: An independent moderator was essential. Her role was to ensure that debate was not dominated by a few individuals, that inappropriate or overly aggressive language was not used, and that the site remained safe and secure (*e.g.* by reminding users to ensure they logged off fully to prevent those without a password having access to the site).

Working in partnership: A key factor in the success of the initiative was the partnership with women's organisations and centres. They played a key part in advising on the consultation, reaching the target audience and providing support to participants.

Confidentiality: Women taking part were provided with a user name that was different from their real name. Such measures guaranteeing participants confidentiality were important in encouraging participants to talk openly and honestly about their experiences and allayed many of their initial concerns about the consultation.

Obstacles identified

Managing participants' expectations: There was concern expressed by some MPs that the Internet format might give participants the impression that they would receive an instant response to the issues or questions they raised with MPs. MPs could not provide immediate responses to questions or read all the contributions, due to other demands on their time. A number of MPs suggested that it would have been useful if organisers had provided them with weekly summaries of the contributions gathered.

Internet access and literacy: As few participants had experience of the Internet and technology generally, the organisers spent a considerable amount of time ensuring women were comfortable with and able to use the technology (*e.g.* special help in getting to the actual website). Some felt that more time was needed to set up IT facilities and provide training and recruit participants, as this was a particularly staff intensive aspect of the consultation.

Website: *http://212.133.53.182/womendiscuss/default.htm*

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UNITED KINGDOM
Floodforum.net

Description

The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) commissioned the Hansard Society to run an online discussion to examine perspectives on flooding. The online discussion was programmed to take place between January and February 2002. The purpose was to stimulate debate on the causes, consequences and approaches to alleviating and preventing flooding to inform parliamentary debate on this issue. This was in the context of a number of reviews by government and parliamentary bodies exploring different aspects of flooding before and after autumn 2000, when heavy rainfall and widespread flooding affected large parts of the UK.

The e-consultation method:

- The discussion ran for one month from 21st January to 17th February 2002 on a dedicated Internet site (*www.floodforum.net*).
- Methods used to publicise the consultation and recruit participants included issuing invitations, local media coverage (including local radio and newspaper interviews and articles), sending emails, websites and word-of-mouth.
- The organisers alerted participants to public Internet access points (*e.g.* available at local libraries) and also accepted written submissions for those without ready email access.
- The discussion was moderated by the Hansard Society. Some messages were posted on the website at the start of the discussion to stimulate debate on key issues the consultation sought to address. As the process unfolded, participants were able to introduce new areas for discussion, although it was the moderator's role to ensure that these were relevant to the overall purpose of the process.

Stage in the policy-making cycle

Agenda-setting. The consultation involved the public in the agenda-setting stage of the UK policy-making cycle. Participants were aware that they were feeding into POST's programme of work on managing flooding and could inform parliamentary debate on this issue. A secondary objective was to stimulate and inform debate on this issue outside of Parliament.

Government units and the target groups involved

The consultation targeted:

- Members of the public living in high risk flood areas and with personal experience of flooding.
- Organisations or people known to have an interest in managing flooding (*e.g.* government departments and agencies; the insurance industry; scientists; engineers and planners).
- Political representatives – covering constituency MPs, members of the House of Lords and local councillors.

Feedback

A total of 532 individuals registered and logged in to the discussion while 157 participants posted a total of 571 messages. It is important to note that it was possible for individuals to log in to the discussion and read other individual's contributions, without posting messages. Although not specifically designed to do so, the results of the discussion will have some input into a Government consultation process on new arrangements for the funding of flood and coastal defences, which started towards the end of floodforum.net.

Satisfaction with the process from participants was gathered via an evaluation survey, made available online and in paper format. In addition there were targeted follow-up discussions with some participants. These results will inform the evaluation of the initiative (see below). Initial analysis of the survey results reveals that participants found the process worthwhile, but they would have valued it being held over a longer timescale. Nevertheless, they said that they would, on the whole, participate in a similar process again. Further assessment was obtained through a public meeting held in the UK Parliament to discuss the issues arising. Over 30 MPs and members of the House of Lords either attended or were represented, and participants of floodforum.net were invited. The meeting was attended by more than 120 people. Speakers at the meeting expressed their satisfaction and gratitude for the contribution that floodforum.net has made to the ongoing debate.

Specific technologies used

Dedicated website site and closed online discussion forum.

Elements of success

Range of recruitment methods: The consultation used a wide range of methods to recruit participants, from coverage on local radio to alerting people via emails. This means that parliament has a wider and more varied

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set of views and opinions than it might otherwise have had on which to inform any debates and/or decisions it takes on flooding issues.

Inclusiveness: The consultation was inclusive of different groups of people affected by the issue, including members of the public, representative bodies and government departments and agencies.

Obstacles

There are some indications that the consultation could have reached more people had the media campaign been more substantial, and on going. Participation in the discussion dropped after the first two weeks, but picked up again in the last week for two reasons. First, it was indeed the last week, and the moderator reminded participants of that fact. Second, the Government published its consultation document on the findings from its flood and coastal defence funding review. This contained a few controversial proposals, and this stimulated record numbers of postings on floodforum.net in the last week.

Contact

The discussion in full is archived at *www.floodforum.net* and the final report of the floodforum is also available at that website. It is also available from *www.parliament.uk/post/report.htm*

POST is an office of both Houses of Parliament, charged with providing independent and balanced analysis of public policy issues that have a basis in science and technology. *www.parliament.uk/post/home.htm*

The **Centre for Management and Policy Studies** (CMPS) at the Cabinet Office are developing a toolkit for policy makers on public involvement and consultation. It will set out set out principles underpinning good practice and various approaches (including e-involvement) and strategies for using public involvement to improve policy making. This will be available on line at *www.cmps.gov.uk/policyhub*

The Office of the E-envoy in the Cabinet Office, in conjunction with the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) is taking the lead in developing the UK Government's policy for e-democracy.

Website: *www.e-envoy.gov.uk*

EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Interactive Policy Making (IPM)

The Interactive Policy Making (IPM) initiative involves the development of two Internet-based mechanisms that will enhance the European Commission's ability to assess the impact of EU policies (or their absence) on the ground:

- A ***consultation*** mechanism which is designed to receive and store rapid and structured collection of stakeholders' reactions to new initiatives.
- A ***feedback*** mechanism which helps to collect spontaneous reactions in the marketplace. It uses existing networks and contact points as intermediaries in order to obtain continuous access to the opinions and experiences of economic operators and EU citizens.

The IPM instruments are accessible via a Web portal called "Your Voice in Europe", which provides the front-end of the IPM initiative and is the "one-stop shop" for all Commission consultations. The portal is for the use of citizens, consumers and businesses. It provides an entry point to all the different ways of making your views known – whether they are positive or negative, technical or general, expert or non-expert.

Both mechanisms consist of online questionnaires/databases which include mainly multiple choice questions. This allows the Commission to obtain an instant analysis of the results, automatically and without further investment of resources. Complex questions cannot of course be reduced entirely to multiple choice form. Both mechanisms therefore allow for the inclusion of free text in replies, thus providing a richer quarry for more traditional in-depth analysis where the "instant" results show that there are issues worth exploring.

The IPM instruments allow an input choice of 11 (or more) languages and an output choice (chosen from the input languages) without prior translation. Moreover, results can be read immediately at any given time and can be managed in a variety of ways, allowing the researcher to pick and choose any field(s) out of the entire database where real-time and neutral information is required. This represents a significant reduction of workload compared to traditional means of consultation (e-mail, fax plus translation). Results can then be used for follow-up reports on, for example, Green papers or for evaluation of existing policies. In this way, it will be possible for the Commission to respond rapidly and in a targeted manner to problems or issues that emerge, and to be more accountable for its actions.

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Access to data can be open or restricted. If necessary (depending on the sensitivity of results) access can be limited to a selected group of people (via login and password). For the feedback database access is given by the IPM team. Each intermediary has access to its own data. For online consultation only the IPM team and the Directorate General (DG) carrying out the consultation have access to the results. The respective DG can decide who else should have access. However, no installation of any software other than an Internet browser is required to access the database online.

How will the IPM initiative change the way the EU works?

Firstly, we hope that more people will participate actively in our consultations and tell us about the shortcomings of the current system. The first hurdle is, of course, to make sure people know that these possibilities exist. Interest from the media will obviously help us to get the message over. Secondly, the use of the Internet will allow us to handle more data in a much shorter time. This will allow us to be more efficient. Finally, the Commission's commitment to publish, share and use the results will contribute to more transparency in the way new policies are prepared. This should help to improve the quality of policy-making.

Current status

The first online consultation was carried out at the end of 2001. The IPM feedback database will be operational by mid 2002. A dedicated Web portal called "Your voice in Europe" (*http://europe.eu.int/yourvoice*) was created during autumn 2001 and a new, more interactive version was released in summer 2002. From 2003, it is planned that this Web portal will become the single access point for all DGs wishing to undertake online consultations.

a) Online Consultations. The online consultation mechanism is designed to receive and store rapid and structured collection of stakeholders' reactions to new initiatives. Stakeholders are able to access this mechanism through the "Your Voice in Europe" Web portal, which provides a "one-stop shop" for all Commission consultations. "Open consultations" consisting of online questionnaires are always directly addressed to stakeholders. Depending on the topic, they can be addressed to a limited group of stakeholders (with login and password) or be open to the public.

Types of sampling used in online consultations

Online consultations allow for different types of sampling:

- *Active sampling* – here the European Commission contacts the respondents and only they are able to take part in the survey. Random groups of respondents can be drawn.

- *Passive sampling* – this is the most visible example of online research. A survey is posted on a website and all visitors to the site (or every Nth visitor) are invited to take part. Clicking on a link takes respondents to a page hosting the survey. This page can incorporate most sites' "look and feel" to provide a seamless transition for respondents.
- *Combination sampling* – as the name suggests, this approach takes elements from both forms. The precise degree to which the two are mixed depends on the specific requirements of the survey. It is possible for both methods to be used completely – operating side-by-side or one after another. For example, visitors to a website may be invited to register for a survey and record certain demographic information. A certain proportion of these respondents (*e.g.* a nationally representative sample) could then be targeted separately.

How the results of online consultations will be used for policy making

The results collected through the online consultation will be reviewed, published and acted upon by the department in question. The outcomes will be published on "Your Voice in Europe" – ensuring transparency and accountability – and used in reviewing and refining further development of the policy.

b) Feedback Mechanism. The feedback mechanism helps to collect spontaneous reactions in the marketplace. It uses existing networks and contact points as intermediaries in order to obtain continuous access to the opinions and experiences of economic operators and EU citizens. The IPM "Feedback mechanism" is filled in *not* by stakeholders but by selected intermediaries, such as Euro Info Centres, Euroguichets, Citizen Signpost Services. The intermediaries encode cases reported by individuals in the feedback database. This is done in the context of individual projects. A large number of these projects are co-financed by the Commission. As soon as the results are submitted, they are automatically fed into an online database. This database has built-in statistical and text search tools which make it possible to pick and choose fields that require analysis.

How the results of the feedback mechanism will be used for policy making

Feedback will provide the Commission services with concrete examples of problems experienced by business representatives, consumers, students, etc. when exercising their EU rights. The results collected in the feedback database can be presented in a variety of ways to show where there are problems and to which sector or policy area they relate. This allows for the preparation of statistical reports which show trends and/or new developments in specific areas (Step 1). The feedback database also stores free text fields

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where intermediaries can provide more detailed information about cases. With the help of experts, the Commission will analyse cases in specific areas in order to see, for example, what problems businesses encounter (Step 2). This will enable the Commission to propose new policy initiatives based on practical experience from the marketplace (introducing new legislation or amending existing legislation). Feedback will thereby broaden the base on which decisions are taken and help the Commission to monitor the effects of new initiatives.

Contacts

Every time a Commission service launches a new public online consultation an announcement to the press will be made (*e.g. IP/01/920 on 28/06/01 – Modernising the Internal Market for industrial goods*)

Stakeholders can then go to a dedicated Web page, "Your voice in Europe", where they will find all the possibilities for participating actively in the Commission's policy making process. Stakeholders should be able to access all the IPM instruments they need from this site. For restricted consultations, participants will receive individual notices.

Website: *http://europa.eu.int/YourVoice*

IPM and the e-engagement matrix

The following matrix shows how the two IPM instruments (online consultation and feedback mechanism) are involved in the five stages of policy making. It should be noted that both instruments can be used, to a greater or lesser extent, at *any* stage of the policy-making process (see Table 5).

Table 5. **European Commission: using IPM at each stage of the policymaking cycle**

Stage in policy-making cycle	Online consultation	Feedback mechanism
Agenda-setting	Establishing the need for a policy; defining the issue/problem to be addressed. *Example:* Modernising the Internal Market for industrial goods	Stakeholders are able to use the feedback mechanism at any stage of the policy-making process.
Analysis	Questions can be asked of stakeholders that analyse the need for a policy in more depth in order to produce a draft policy. *Example:* Consultation on Cyber-Squatting	
Formulation	Informing stakeholders of the proposed policy and inviting their views on it, ensuring a good, workable policy. *Example:* Business Test Panel	
Implementation	Developing legislation, at different stages during the implementation process; forming a delivery plan.	
Monitoring	Canvassing general opinion on how a particular policy has been implemented, feeding into discussions and reports, possibly leading to suggestions as to revision of the policy. *Example:* Consultation on implementation of the Data Protection directive	Through a network of European Information Centres, Citizen Signpost Services and Euroguichets, stakeholders are able to make their views known *spontaneously* about a policy that has been implemented. These views are then passed on to the Commission. This is the most important use of the feedback mechanism.

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ANNEX 1

Commonly Used E-Engagement Terms

Accessibility

Is concerned with the means by which all groups can have access to the electronic engagement, including the visually disadvantaged. Reference sites include the Web accessibility Initiative (*www.w3.org/wai*); in the UK guidelines from the RNIB website (*www.rnib.org.uk/digital*) provides information on their "See It Right" Campaign which gives advice on access technology and how to make a website more accessible, in the US see Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Chat room

A virtual space where a chat session takes place. Technically, it is just the real-time communication between two computer users, such that once a chat has been initiated, either user can type in information and the entered text appears on the other user's screen.

Instant messaging

A type of communications service that enables you to create a private chat room with another user. Typically, the instant messaging system alerts you whenever somebody on your chat room list is online, then you can initiate a chat session with that person

Bulletin boards

Simply an electronic message centre relevant to a specific interest group. You can review messages left by others and leave your own message.

Discussion forum

An online discussion group where users, usually with common interests, can exchange open messages:

- ***Issue-based fora***, *i.e.* organised around policy issues that have been formulated by policy-makers, interest groups or "experts", and presented as the heading of one or more discussion "threads". Responses are sought in order to gauge opinion or solicit ideas. Position statements, links to topic-related websites and other background information may also be presented, although they are often lacking.
- ***Policy-based fora***, *i.e.* organised around themes/issues that relate directly to a draft policy that is meant to address these, and where discussion threads are intended to solicit responses from those affected. Participants might be encouraged to submit alternative ideas and suggestions but the format implies that what is being sought is an indication of how far the participants agree (or not) with the proposals, and why.

Thread

A series of messages that have been posted as replies to each other in a discussion forum

Newsgroups

Similar to a discussion forum, to view and post messages to a newsgroup, you need a news reader program that runs on your computer and connects you to a news server on the Internet. There are thousands of newsgroups.

Web forms

A form on a website that enables visitors to communicate with the host by filling in the fields and submitting the information. Information received via a form can be received by email and processed by other specific software

Online moderator

The role of the moderator is to ensure that all comments adhere to the explicit conditions of use and it is their responsibility to remove comments that breach these rules. There are two main options with regard to moderation: pre-moderation and post-moderation. With the pre-moderation all comments are sent to a moderator who decides whether to accept them based on the conditions of use, with post-moderation all comments go

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straight to the e-consultation and the moderator typically monitors every 24 hours and removes any comments that breach the conditions of use.

Online facilitator

A facilitator is responsible for ensuring that the comments stay on topic, summarising the comments, and generally supporting the deliberation process when required. Facilitation is important if one of the objectives of the e-consultation is to support deliberative engagement between users.

Privacy statement/policy

This ensures that users understand how the personal information they enter online will be used and who will have access to it. Guidelines on this are available from the OECD privacy policy generator *http://cs3-hq.oecd.org/scripts/pwv3/pwhome.htm*

Remote electronic voting

Voting that takes place by electronic means from any location.

ANNEX 2

Collaborative Research Projects

Another important source of experience is from collaborative research projects. National governments can take an active part in this regard by *a*) promoting the collection and exchange of research results; and *b*) incorporating the results of research as end-users.

In 2000 the European Commission launched e-Europe in order to stimulate the broad adoption of technological research achievements by European society at large. One of its objectives was to accelerate e-commerce and e-Government use across Europe. There are three associated R&D programmes – the IDA programme which is developing a trans-European telematic network between administrations, the e-content programme to stimulate commercial exploitation of public sector information and the Information Society Technologies (IST) programme. In the US the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the PEW Charitable Trust both fund e-democracy and e-Government R&D projects.

The remit of the European Commission's IST RTD Programme, and especially the "Systems and Services for the Citizen" Key Action, is to ensure that research addresses the major socio-economic problems facing Europe. It covers, amongst others, applications for providing better access to administrations. So far over 30 large scale R&D projects have been funded under the administration theme which are split between e-Government projects and e-democracy projects. The research issues being addressed include:

- What is the future of digital deliberation and e-voting?
- How may online forms of democracy affect the rules of government?
- Which techniques, systems, tools and methods are most appropriate to support emerging forms of democracy?

This section highlights some important collaborative research projects currently being funded by the European Commission though its Fifth

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Framework Programme (FP5) (*www.cordis.lu/fp5/about.htm*) which sets out the priorities for the European Union's research for the period 1998-2002. The thematic programme "Systems and Services for the Citizen" specifically includes R&D projects aimed at online democracy.

1. EVE

This is an Accompanying Measure financed by the European Commission under the IST program, contract number IST-2001-33008. The primary objective of EVE is to compare the impact that socio-political practices and available ICTs have on citizens and public authorities. The desired outcome of this comparison is a clearer understanding of e-democracy and its place in electoral practices. New business models and technological standards are expected to emerge as a result of the research conducted during this project. CNRS and MTA, the French research institutions manage the project. Step one of their investigation is to review following projects: AGORA 2000, CYBERVOTE, DEMOS, EDEN, E-COURT, E-POLL, E-POWER, EURO-CITI, VSIIS and WEBDEMOCRACY. In total the EVE CLUSTER includes 10 projects and 73 organisations (both public and private) in 16 countries, representing an investment of € 27 million, plus the European Commission's contribution of € 16 million.

Project EVE has two main objectives. The first objective is to evaluate the impact communication and information technologies have on local, national, and international authorities as well as on citizens themselves. The second objective is to establish standards for inexpensive, safe, and efficient voting systems as well as to develop business models projected to be applicable at local and national levels. Project EVE both co-ordinates and evaluates research and development activities funded by the European Commission in the fields of participative methods in e-democracy, innovative consultation, and access systems. However, EVE specifically focuses on innovative e-voting systems which are based on advanced information technologies. It has the following goals:

- Study social and cultural reactions to the development of new services and voting systems offered by digital cities.
- Position existing initiatives within a global context.
- Identify synergies and complementarities between various investigated initiatives in the EU in view of developing the appropriate cross-fertilisation.
- Stimulate individual efforts in order to increase work efficiency.
- Implement effective ways to disseminate information and develop awareness.

- Provide information to help standardise legal initiatives.

The website for the project is at: *www.eve.cnrs.fr* (consulted August 2002).

2. AGORA 2000

The AGORA 2000 project concerns the design a new paradigm of democratic regional/urban planning process that envisages the full involvement of citizens in the decision process. The objective is to try to bridge the gap between citizens and regional/urban decision makers in order to get common, enhanced solutions to territory planning issues.

AGORA 2000:

- Supports the decision making process of local/regional authorities; the objective is to define several possible alternative scenarios, with the identification and quantification of, as far as possible, quantitative parameters for comparing scenarios.
- Presents taken decisions, their rationale and, in general, the overall decision process to citizens by means of a user-friendly interface and intuitive 3D representation tools.
- Checks reactions from citizens and collect feedback from them.

The Project partners include: Comunità Montana Valle Maira (Italy), SATA. Applicazione Tecnologie Avanzate (Italy), Amministrazione Regionale Toscana (Italy), Ayuntamiento de Valencia (Spain), Universidad Politecnica de Valencia (Spain), Universidad Politecnica de Madrid (Spain), Aquitaine Europe Communication (France), Business Flow Consulting (France), Ergon Consulting and Systems (Greece), Municipality of Anatoli (Greece).

Its website is at *www.agora2000.org* (consulted February 2002).

3. AVANTI

AVANTI is using embodied agents to make information universally more accessible. The objectives of the project are to:

- Improve access to the technology for everyone.
- Remove obstacles that prevent use of ICTs.
- Develop new, more interesting and exciting ways of presenting information.

All with a view of leading to greater interaction of citizens with public services and the inclusion of groups who were digitally excluded.

The project will develop an Avatar, that is a digital assistant that will guide a person through online transactions and services by asking a series of questions in simple language and respond to a wide range of questions from the user. It will be able to store user information and be able to adapt to fit an

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individual's needs. Each of the participating cities in England, Scotland, Sweden and Latvia are developing a public service demonstrator. The technical partners are Microsoft and ICL.

Its website is at *www.avantiproject.org* (consulted August 2002).

4. DEMOS

The reason for the DEMOS project, as noted on the project website, is the fact that voter turnout across Europe has dropped to historic lows, and more and more citizens are losing interest in politics. In the media, some observers have talked about this apathy as a "failure of democracy", others have gone further and have labelled it "a crisis of representation". One reason for the diminishing interest in voting and political involvement is the growing distance between citizens and the decision-makers, be they local, national or in Brussels and Strasbourg. It may be that political problems have become more complex and that individual decisions involve a large mix of interests, but at every level of politics, decisions are not sufficiently well-communicated to the citizens. The gap between the individual citizen and political institutions is seen as too large, while the chance of having any individual influence is seen as too small.

The DEMOS project is concerned with developing innovative online consultation tools. The open Web-based system will attempt to offer a user-friendly interface and will include software modules which allow DEMOS-based systems to be adjusted to the full range of processes of online debate. The approach and the system will be validated at two different trial sites – Municipality of Bologna and the City of Hamburg.

This is a collaborative project and the partners are TUHH Technologie (Germany), GMD-Forschungszentrum Informationstechnik (Germany), Ibermatica (Spain), IPSOS-RSL (UK) Pixelpark (Germany), Municipality of Bologna (Italy), Nexus-International Broadcasting association (Italy), Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg (Germany).

The website for the project is *www.demos.nexus.org* (consulted August 2002).

5. EDEN

The EDEN project will help to stimulate and support citizens' participation in the decision-making process, specifically in the area of urban planning, through the development of Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools designed to make communication between citizens and public administrations easier and more effective. EDEN focuses on urban planning partly because it is an area of public administration that has a long history of citizen participation, and partly because of the requirement for widespread

adoption of statutes that formalise planning procedures. The project's objective is being achieved by developing a set of NLP tools and methodologies, based on user requirements analysis that will be integrated into urban planning tools. The specific tools provide:

- Style checking to make information more understandable by identifying "strange" words and expressions in urban planning related documents.
- Support for translation of documents to an ethnic minority language.
- Automatic and assisted preparation of Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) lists from questions and answers, and summaries of expressed opinions.
- Natural language access to databases containing maps and plans of the local areas.
- Discussion forums and opinion polling.

EDEN is a collaborative project with public administrations: Bologna, Antwerp, Bremen, Nizko, Vienna, along with Piacentini Archive and with research partners: Omega Generation, International Teledemocracy Centre, Public Voice Lab – PVL, Telepolis Antwerpen, TZI – Center for Computing Technology at the University of Bremen and Yana Research.

The website for the EDEN project is at *www.edentool.org* (consulted February 2002).

6. EURO-CITI

The EURO-CITI project aims to improve the efficiency of local authorities, reinforce the concept of democracy and foster collaboration between local authorities at all levels (regional, national, European). It will do this by specifying, developing and testing a common architecture and related services targeting the public sector. The proposed services include e-voting, e-consultation and electronic submission of forms.

Therefore, the objectives of EURO-CITI are:

- *To define and develop a unified architecture* (EURO-CITI architecture) with the following characteristics:
- Access from different end-points (home or public PC, kiosks and WAP devices).
  - Support of different access levels using network security and authentication/authorisation.
  - Dynamic configuration and management of networks of EURO-CITI servers.
  - Facilitation of provision of added-value network transaction services.

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- *To achieve a fast introduction of transaction services* (EURO-CITI services) exploiting the architecture. The foreseen groups of services include:
  - Tele-voting for conducting opinion polls, petitions.
  - Electronic submission of forms.
  - Tele-consulting of citizens.
- *To propose and test a process model including a process re-engineering methodology* aiming to assist local authorities in realising the potential of the EURO-CITI transaction services.
- *To achieve testing* of the above in order to validate the adopted approaches.

Partners include: University of Athens (Greece), Archetypon (Greece), Comunicacion interactiva (Spain), Institut Municipal d'Informatica (Spain), London Borough of Brent (UK), Municipality of Athens Development agency (Greece), Schlumberger systems (France), T-Nova Deutsche Telekom Innovationsgesellschaft (Germany).

The website for the EURO-CITI project is at *www.euro-citi.org* (consulted August 2002).

7. E-Power

E-POWER is a European programme for an ontology based working environment for regulations and legislation. It aims to implement a knowledge management solution by providing a method and tools that help to improve the quality of legislation whilst facilitating the enforcement of law. Both method and tools will decrease the time to market for new/changed legislation and facilitate the maintenance of legislation and improving the access to the governmental body of knowledge by offering new E-services. Furthermore the use of this method and tools will result in a more efficient use of scarce knowledge resources.

The partners include: Dutch Tax and Customs Administration (DTCA), (The Netherlands), O and I Management Partners B.V., (The Netherlands), Mega International (France), LibRT B.V., (The Netherlands), Application Engineers NV (Belgium), De Verzekeringen Van Fortis Bank NV (Belgium).

The website for the E-POWER project is at: *www.lri.jur.uva.nl/research/epower.html* (consulted February 2002).

8. Cybervote

This project aims to achieve an improvement of the democratic process by increasing voter participation and thereby increasing the number of votes. Online voting should lead to an increase of citizens taking part in numerous types of elections. The project will evaluate to what extent online voting

influences voter participation. CyberVote should improve the voting process for all voters, but examples of citizens who should particularly benefit from CyberVote include people with limited mobility (the disabled, the ill, hospital patients, the elderly, etc.), people travelling during the election day, and expatriates. The goal of the project is to develop and demonstrate an online voting system integrating a highly secure and verifiable Internet voting protocol, and designed to be used at local, regional, national or European elections. The project will analyse the laws in force in the participating countries in order to identify the requirements the system shall meet but also to study possible amendments to allow its use in the legal framework in Europe.

This system will allow voters to cast their vote through the use of Internet terminals such as PCs, handheld devices and mobile phones. It will rely upon an innovative voting protocol, designed within the project that uses advanced cryptographic tools. This protocol will ensure authentication of the voters, integrity and privacy of their vote when sending it over the Internet and during the vote counting and auditing process.

This system will be tested in 2003 during trial elections that will be held in Germany, France and Sweden. These trials will involve more than 3 000 voters and will allow full assessment of the system before any potential product launch. The CyberVote project officially started on 1 September 2000 and will end on 1 March 2003.

Partners include: Matra Systemes and Information (France), British Telecommunications (UK), Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium), Mairie d'Issy-les-Moulineaux (France), Freie Hansestadt Bremen (Germany), Nokia (Sweden), Technische Universiteit Eindhoven (The Netherlands), Kista Stadsdelsnaemnd (Sweden).

The website for the project is *www.eucybervote.org* (consulted August 2002).

9. WeboCracy

The project aims to empower citizens through the introduction of innovative communication, access and voting systems supporting increased participation in the democratic processes. This organisational objective will be achieved through scientific objectives which are of technical and methodological nature. Technical objectives involve design and development of a Web-based system Webocrat. Webocrat will support: communication and discussion, publication of documents, browsing and navigation, voting, intelligent retrieval (access to requested documents), calculation of summaries/statistics. All functions will be supported by knowledge model module. The methodological objectives are focused on development of a methodological framework and organisational practices for development and

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management of systems providing online support to public administration services.

The partners include: *Technical University of Kosice* (Slovak Republic), *The School of Computing and Information Technology, University of Wolverhampton*, (UK), *The Department of Information Systems*, *University of Essen*, (Germany), *JUVIER s.r.o.*, (Slovak Republic), *Citec Information, Citec Engineering Oy Ab*, Vaasa, (Finland), *The Local Authority Kosice – City ward Tahanovce*, (Slovak Republic), *The Local Authority Kosice – City ward Dargovskych hrdinov*, (Slovak Republic), *Wolverhampton Council*, (UK).

The project's website is at *esprit.ekf.tuke.sk/webocracy/index.html* (consulted August 2002).

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PART II

The Future of the Internet and Democracy Beyond Metaphors, Towards Policy

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This paper argues that much analysis of the relationship between the Internet and democracy has been obscured by the use of metaphors. The paper seeks to root e-democracy within the context of changing democratic culture and procedures. A model of information-flows for e-democracy is outlined. A number of policy objectives are set out, including the creation of trusted online spaces for democracy; integration of e-democracy into constitutionally recognised channels; the cultivation of meaningful interactivity between representatives and represented; the recruitment of traditionally excluded voices to online public debate, which entails seeing information as a common resource and ensuring just representation of all parts of the globe. These principles and proposals are an attempt to escape metaphor and speculation and establish policy objectives that can be evaluated.

Exploring metaphors

Surfing on the information highway

The Internet is a vast, amorphous metaphor in search of tangibility. A highway, an agora, a mall, a library, a portal, a Web, a brain, an ethereal universe of bits and bytes. We surf, we scroll, we browse, we search, we navigate, we post, we chat, we lurk, we log on and we go offline.

For some, the Internet is that which lies within their computer: the innards; a virtual mind; a cyber-soul. Talk of "controlling" the Internet and of "knowledge management" suggest that, like Frankenstein's mind, the Internet has an autonomous existence which humans must pacify or learn to live with. Anxieties about the Internet's ever-expanding outpouring of volcanic data suggest that its programmes, codes and design are invulnerable to human control. Newspaper and magazine articles (written in the solidity of print, the previous millenium's volcanic lava) urge us to adapt to the world of the Internet, as if the virtual universe is inherently bigger than ours.

For others, the Internet is conceived as a socio-neural network. Former US Vice-President Al Gore suggested, as early as 1994, that "We now can at last create a planetary information network that transmits messages and images with the speed of light from the largest city to the smallest village on every continent." (Gore, 1994) Castells' notion of "the network society" offers a metaphor of hope for a society of increasingly unfathomable complexity (Castells, 1996). The metaphor suggests a paradox: on the one side, increasing anomie, public alienation and privatisation; on the other, spatio-temporal compression and the prospect of a global village. But if villages have squares in which the public can gather, networks have no obvious centre and require us to **think in new ways about the place of the public.**

Another, more populist metaphor, depicts the Internet as an anarchic, Hobbesian jungle that engenders fear and calls for legal protection. The Internet, we are told, attracts predators; our children are not safe there. And then there are viruses (malicious ones, indeed), bugs, trojan horses, crashes and memory loss. Objectively, it may be less safe to give your credit card over the counter in a shop than through a secure site on the Internet, but this is not how it feels when dealing in faceless transactions. In a world where honesty is judged by facial features and voice tone, the absence of both feeds the

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imagination with images of cyber-tricksters lurking the Web and luring the gullible. The Internet becomes a metaphor for entrapment (a net; a web) and "users", like malleable addicts, surf innocently towards cyber-exploitation.

In contrast to such apprehension, the Internet has also spawned a plethora of utopian metaphors. The conception of cyberspace as a technocratic dream-world follows a long tradition of futuristic visions of humanity liberated from its burdens by omnipotent technology. For William Gibson (Gibson, 1984), the term's orginator, cyberspace constituted

A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators in every nation … A graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data.

In 1996 John Perry Barlow published his *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, a veritable constitution for an autonomous, unworldly cyber-utopia (Barlow, 1996).

Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the Web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live.

- *We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth.*
- *We are creating a world where anyone anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.*
- *Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us. They are all based on matter, and there is no matter here.*

Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonwealth, our governance will emerge.

Our identities may be distributed across many of your jurisdictions. The only law that all our constituent cultures would generally recognize is the Golden Rule. We hope we will be able to build our particular solutions on that basis. But we cannot accept the solutions you are attempting to impose.

Barlow's was not a lone voice. Other cyber-utopians foresaw the transformation of economic life in a world of e-commerce (Kelly, 1996).

Someday soon, cyberspace – the vast, intangible territory where computers meet and exchange information – will be populated with electronic communities and businesses. In your home, a protean box will hook you into a wealth of goods and services. It will receive and send mail, let you make a phone or video call or send a fax or watch a movie or buy shoes or diagnose a rash or pay bills or get cash (a new digital kind) or write your mother. That will be just the living-room manifestation of what promises to be a radical-and

rapid-transformation of commerce and society, the greatest since the invention of the automobile.

While Kurzweil, described in the *New York Times* as "a leading futurist of our time", has asserted that (Kurzweil, 1999):

By 2019 a $1 000 computer will at least match the processing power of the human brain. By 2029 the software for intelligence will have been largely mastered and the average Personal computer will be equivalent to 1 000 brains.

Metaphors are never neutral. They convey ontological assumptions that are ideologically loaded but rarely decoded. As Lakoff and Johnson warn, to ignore the significance of metaphors is to accept their sub-texts at face value (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Talk of an Internet "revolution" only makes sense if one believes that history is technologically driven; addressing the "digital divide" is only meaningful if it is somehow different from other social divisions rooted in inequality; the promotion of "virtual communities" comprising "netizens" can be self-deluding without a chain of authentication between online and real-life identities. This is not to disparage such metaphors, but to expose them to intellectual interrogation. The notion of e-democracy should not be free from such scrutiny.

Unearthing democracy

If the Internet is surrounded by linguistic mists of novelty and uncertainty, democracy is spoken about as one of the few remaining sacred concepts of our age. As Graham has well observed, up until the end of the eighteenth century most people knew what democracy meant and most respectable people opposed it; in our century few people know what democracy means but most respectable people are in favour of it (Graham, 1986).

Where within the political topography of civil society is the place of democracy? **Where does one go if one wants to become a democratically engaged citizen?** Where does one go to learn through practice about how to be a democratic citizen? Where does one go if one wants to argue a point of political principle? To whom does one complain if there is too little democracy? Libraries are filled with books describing, praising and setting out conditions for democracy. But go to the information desk and ask where in any city, village or nation-state one goes to "do" democracy and one is met with blank looks of incomprehension. There are polling stations, but these are makeshift, remaining only for one day every few years, requiring no more than a few seconds of activity from each citizen entering them.

The most likely place to be sent on a search for the physical architecture of democratic life is Parliament. But the institutions of the democratic world do not "look and feel" very democratic. The physical architecture of our parliamentary and government buildings reveals a great deal about the

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exclusivity of their self-perceptions. Nineteenth-century parliamentary buildings are traditionally grandiloquent, inpenetrable and affectedly aloof from their urban surroundings. It is a paradox that the great democratic legislatures of the world are pervaded by conspicuous imagery of public disconnection. A clue to the public's role in all of this is the title given to them by the British Parliament: Strangers. Citizens are strangers in the house of democracy and are required to swear an oath of silence before they enter the gallery overlooking the parliamentary chamber. This makes sense: parliaments are representative institutions precisely because it is not possible for all citizens to be present and speak for themselves.

Where, then, *do* citizens speak for themselves? Where are the public places in which citizens can set agendas and debate new ideas, inform or challenge those who represent them, or share thoughts and experiences with one another simply because the collective view counts in a democracy? Richard Sennett has observed, "were modern architects asked to design spaces that better promote democracy, they would lay down their pens; there is no modern design equivalent to the ancient assembly." (Sennett, 1977)

The opacity of democratic space coincides with an atrophying civic culture. More people than ever can vote, but fewer than at any time in the history of the universal franchise choose to do so. Popular faith in parliaments and other institutions of democratic representation is declining. A Harvard study entitled *Why People Don't Trust Government* describes and laments the decline of public trust in democratic institutions (Nye, Zelikow and King, 1997). The media of mass communication seek to bring the stories and imagery of democratic representation into people's homes, but the evidence suggests that most citizens would prefer to watch anything else – or nothing at all – rather than endure televised politics. According to ITC research, during the 2001 British general election 40% of viewers switched channels and 8% switched off their sets rather than watch election coverage. 70% of viewers said that they were either completely uninterested (29%) or not very interested (41%) in election coverage. In the US, 53.8% of local TV news broadcasts are about crime, disaster and war, with 0.7% devoted to public service announcements. The average American child sees 200 000 violent acts and 16 000 murders (on TV) before they reach the age of 18. How many democratic debates do they witness?

Democracy without a living space for its enactment becomes symbolic rather than participatory. In a symbolically democratic world, citizens' main engagement with power is in the confined and formally regulated space of the polling booth where they exercise their few seconds of power. As consuming spectators, they enter the electoral arena as targets of sophisticated techniques of public seduction. Once legitimised via the ballot, power becomes mediated through TV interviews, political gossip and grand state

occasions, leaving citizens as onlookers. A citizenry which is disengaged from the policy process and confined to occasional voting for leaders has such a weak relationship with democracy that politics becomes largely managerial.

Inventing e-democracy

The recurrent metaphor of e-democracy is the *agora,* conjuring images of folksy civic gatherings within an all-embracing public sphere. Of course, the metaphor deceives: the Athenian *agora* was far from democratic or inclusive, for it was closed to women, slaves and aliens; and it was mainly a talking shop, with real decisions being made elsewhere. As a political myth, the Internet as *agora* sits well with the rhetorical fantasy of push-button, plebiscitary democracy which pervaded much of the early literature about e-democracy (Becker and Slaton, 2000).

The lure of direct democracy, half libertarian-populist and half romantic shades of Rousseau, served to root the project in the realm of the politically naïve and nostalgic. Rather than seeking to place digital technologies in the service of existing democracy, the highly speculative and futuristic e-democracy pioneers appeared to anticipate the implosion of constitutions and institutions in the face of the new digital paradigm.

At the same time, a utilitarian, bureaucratically rational agenda for e-Government, based upon hopes of cheaper and more efficient service delivery via online transactions, failed to capture the public imagination. **The dilemma of early thinking about e-Governance was that most Internet enthusiasts did not understand or care very much about political democracy and most politicians and government officials regarded the Internet as a one-way conveyor belt.** Parliaments and Government departments went online, but dreaded the consequences of interactivity (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2002). Politicians liked the idea of websites as cheap electronic brochures, but had little understanding of what the public wanted from them (Coleman, 2000). Just as politics in the offline world was grey, archaic and uncool, politics on the net tended to be instantly recognisable by its worthy dullness and incestuous jargon.

Ironically, while e-politics replicated much that was most obsolete in non-e-politics, there were unmissable signs that "politics as usual" would have to be modernised. Twentieth-century political representation was characterised by centralisation of power, based upon elite deliberation. This produced four points of strain: Parliament, as the central institution of public representation, seemed disconnected from public life and in need of modernisation; politicians' obsession with public opinion polling, as a scientific approach to measuring public thinking, failed to reflect the dynamics of opinion or the rich depths of public experience and expertise; the

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mass media offered ringside seats for the public to watch the political spectacle, but the spectators became disenchanted, regarding the political and media elite with an equal contempt; and finally – perhaps most intangibly – the public's appetite for seeing, listening to and trusting itself could be ignored neither by politicians nor the media. These were seismic changes in political culture and call for some elaboration.

The parliamentary system of government was founded upon the idea of remote representation. It was assumed that distance, human scale and public competence separated the represented from their elected representatives. A Burkean disdain for mandated delegation discouraged notions of permanent connection between citizens and politicians. **Policy deliberation was for the sovereign elite; the job of the public was to vote for their legislators and then withdraw from the process until the next election.** The problem for parliamentarians, though, was that they are not sovereign and their deliberations rarely count for much. In reality, the legislature is a creature of the executive, its members being little more than whipped voting fodder in response to Government policies. So, by the late twentieth century frustration was manifesting itself from two sources: MPs, who were unsure of their role and felt democratically redundant, and the public who, in a post-deferential age, felt neglected and unheard and demanded a new kind of relationship with their representatives. Proposals for parliamentary modernisation emerged in response to this sense of disconnection, as well as being a spur to greater administrative efficiency.

While Parliament sought to reconnect with the public, the significance of public opinion was being contested. Since the 1930s, when Gallup invented scientific opinion polling, the results of such polling had come to have an increasing influence upon policy formation. Not only were such polls trusted to predict public voting behaviour (in reality, only a small percentage of polls are designed for such a purpose), but they were regarded by politicians as the best available guides to public values and desires in relation to various areas of policy. Critics of conventional polling argued that at best this measures what a representative sample of uninformed, prejudiced citizens think about a particular issue at one particular moment. In a sense, polls provide an instant snapshot of public ignorance. Fishkin and other deliberative democrats considered that this was selling the public short and that two other questions should be added to the polling equation: firstly, what does the public know about a particular issue when it is polled? and secondly, how might the public's response change if they were exposed to balanced information within a deliberative environment? A number of deliberative polls were run, designed to find out how a representative sample group would change its responses to poll questions in the light of exposure to information and discussion. The results were compelling: informed citizens tended to

arrive at different conclusions about policy issues from when they were uninformed (Fishkin, 1997). In traditional Lippmannesque/Schumpeterian political theory, the role of politicians is to appeal to the ignorance, selfishness, and inertia of citizens; **deliberative democracy holds out promise of a more dialogical, evidence-based relationship between representatives and represented.** Beyond deliberative polls, this relationship has been explored in a range of ways, including people's juries, consensus conferences, visioning exercises and participatory simulations.

Politics has always been mediated by professional journalists and editors, but since the 1960s one medium has dominated and reshaped political communication: television. Politicians and parties spent much of the second half of the twentieth century adapting themselves for television consumption. The increased transparency and accessibility of televised politics have undoubtedly been positive for democracy, but another effect has been to encourage a climate of intellectual risk aversion, excessive stage management and systemic co-dependency between media professionals and politicians. As Blumler and Gurevitch (1997), the eminent scholars of political communication, have noted:

> *… the political communication process has been getting into ever deeper trouble. An impoverishing way of addressing citizens about political issues has been gaining an institutionally rooted hold that seems inherently difficult to resist or shake off.*

Energetic efforts have been made by the media over the past two decades to move away from monological formats and to encourage greater interactivity between politicians and the people. Formats such as audience discussion, phone-ins and online fora have facilitated "talkback" paths designed to give space for the public voice, often in dialogue with politicians. But the participating public still do not trust the politicians' motives for talking to them (Coleman and Ross, 2001).

Perhaps the most conspicuous change to occur has been in the public itself. **Citizens have become less deferential and more confident; less politically loyal and tribalistic, more consumerist and volatile; less in awe of experts and professionals and more inclined to trust their own experience.** The public has come to be more interested than ever in seeing and hearing itself via the media; with the growth of affordable video technologies, traditional walls between media production and consumption began to crumble. So-called reality TV, ranging from live talk to fly-on-the-wall documentaries to the videocam environment of *Big Brother,* showed the public engaging in its own conversations, in its own voices, rather than as onlookers on the exclusive deliberations of a seemingly closed elite (Coleman, 2003).

So, by the beginning of the twenty-first century there was a sense that politics should and would adapt. The ripples of change – parliamentary

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modernisation and constitutional reform; the growing interest and experimentation in deliberative democracy; the attempt by broadcasters to promote greater interactivity; the growing public interest in "real people" – were not particularly connected to one another, but flowed from a common cause. None of these changes were driven by the emergence of digital technologies. As noted earlier, most of the e-democracy pioneers were far too intoxicated by the heady air of the technocratic future to care very much about existing political institutions and relationships. Where efforts were made to put politics online, these were mainly led by enthusiastic technologists whose primary aim was to replicate routine practices. Small-scale experimental projects, like Minnesota e-politics (founded 1994) and UK Citizens Online Democracy (founded 1996), were exceptional in their commitment to civic networking and the creation of deliberative fora. Some local authorities promoted e-democracy projects (the leading examples were in Scandinavia, Canada and the UK), but few were clearly focused, well resourced or constitutionally connected. Generally speaking, the democratic and digital agendas evolved along different paths, largely unaware of one another.

There is now a compelling case for synergy between digital and democratic developments. The potential to utilise the inherent feedback paths of digital technologies in order to facilitate public policy deliberation and two-way governance is too important to remain confined to techies and e-enthusiasts. Democracy as we have so far known it was a product of an age where effective representation was constrained by disconnections of time and distance. As these barriers are transcended by communication technologies which are asynchronous and global, democratic institutions can only flourish if they become more porous, accessible, accountable and rooted in public space. One is not talking here about e-democracy as the digitisation of mundane administrative tasks, or as a sci-fi gimmick, but as a force for the reinvigoration of democratic politics.

Re-inventing representation

An effective representative democracy requires a five-way information flow:

- Government to Citizen (G2C).
- Citizen to Government (C2G).
- Representative to Citizen (R2C).
- Citizen to Representative (C2R).
- Citizen to Citizen (C2C).

Additional flows include G2G – a fundamental objective of the joined-up government agenda; R2R – particularly important in an era of political subsidiarity; and R2G – enabling legislators to be more in touch with the

processes and knowledge resources of the executive. These are important, but primarily administrative, aspects of governance.

Within the existing model of democratic representation, these flows are somewhat restricted or clogged:

- **G2C takes place largely via the mass media,** principally television and the press. Government distrusts the mediating interpretations of the media; citizens distrust the extent and quality of Government information and tend to switch off when presented with it.
- **C2G is limited.** Government runs many consultations, but few citizens participate in these and there is much scepticism about Government responsiveness to public input. Most citizens believe that whatever views or expertise they possess will have little influence upon Government.
- **R2C is limited outside of election campaigning.** Representatives work hard to win citizens' votes, and make strenuous efforts to use local media to inform their constituents about how well they are being represented, but there are few opportunities to hear what their constituents think about specific policy issues.
- **C2R is very limited.** Citizens can raise issues with their representatives in local surgeries or by mail – in some case by email. But, outside of traditional lobbying, there are few opportunities to feed in to the legislative process by raising new information or perspectives. Few citizens are active members of political parties or lobby groups, so few voices tend to be heard by representatives when policies are being evaluated.
- **C2C is the basis of a healthy civil society, but it is in decline,** consistent with a broader decline in "social capital." In general, citizens do not discuss policy issues with one another – even when those issues matter to them. It is not easy to find places or networks for such discussion. The media provide some opportunities, but these rarely enable citizens to develop communication with other citizens.

This is a rough and pessimistic sketch of existing communication channels for democratic representation. Within this structure there are a number of blockages. Unblocking democratic channels of communication could be one of the most important functions of e-democracy.

How can these channels be opened up?

Trusted space

Democracy, as a collective relationship which unites and aggregates vast numbers of diverse, anonymous people, is highly dependent upon trust. A good example of democratic trust is witnessed when people vote in elections. Even though they know that their vote might not count very much in the

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overall scheme of things, citizens trust the polling station as a fairly regulated democratic space. They do not trust one polling station or ballot box more than others, but regard the space itself as trustworthy. There is now a need to create a much more expansive democratic space, beyond the occasional moments of elections, for the purpose of public deliberation.

Jay Blumler and I have argued that the Internet possesses a "vulnerable potential" to provide a democratic space which is open to all and connected to real democratic institutions (Blumler and Coleman, 2001). Just as polling stations are not automatically trustworthy – and were not always so – discursive or deliberative spaces need to be established, funded, promoted and regulated. The upkeep of **a civic commons in cyberspace** needs to become a matter of public service, rather like the protection of fair elections or public libraries or public broadcasting. Trusted spaces will not emerge spontaneously or without effort. Apart from anything else, the commercial command of cyberspace is so strong that it becomes increasingly difficult to think of the Internet in civic terms.

There must be varied levels of entry to an online civic commons, so that not everyone is expected to participate with the same degree of commitment or expected outcome. Some people will want to engage in technical policy deliberations; others will want to exchange views with those sharing their interests; others still will want to formulate rather than respond to an agenda for debate. In a pluralistic democratic space there should be room for all of these approaches to public deliberation. The key to making online public space useful to citizens will be the provision of appropriate tools for consultation, deliberation and decision-making. Such tools would include online libraries, archives and information digests; discussion moderation services; advocacy aids; newsgroups and Web rooms for specialist discussions; and mechanisms for summarising points raised in discussion.

Constitutional integration

Democratic representation is rooted in real-world institutions, such as central Government, Parliament(s), devolved assemblies, local councils, the European Union, the United Nations. The procedural efficiency and public accountability of these institutions is key to their democratic success or failure. E-democracy cannot afford to ignore them or be remote from the process of their structural and cultural modernisation. The debate about the future of Government and Parliament and the debate about the Internet and democracy need to converge.

The failure of most e-democracy experiments to date – as well as earlier initiatives to create two-way governance using cable TV and other pre-digital media – has been their unconnectedness from constitutional power. In a period

of administrative modernisation and constitutional reform, e-democratic structures need to be embedded dynamically within the structure and culture of governance.

Government and elected representatives must not be outsiders to e-democracy initiatives. They should learn to understand them, participate within them and respond to them. They need to recognise that democratic interactivity involves a two-way flow of energy. Without this, the public will regard e-democracy initiatives as a sham and will withdraw from them; treat them with contempt and hostility; or establish their own flows of counter-governmental communication.

As the traditional channels of political aggregation, the parties need to examine and adapt to the e-democratic options that are open to them. As currently organised, political parties are over-centralised and under-utilise the talents and experience of their members. The parties' main use of the Internet thus far has been to replicate an e-commerce model of online campaigning, aimed at selling themselves to voters. Few voters have been much excited by this appeal – nor are they likely to be in the future. Why should citizens look to politically-biased websites, offering them little more than electronic brochures, for their political information, when they can obtain much more critical and reliable accounts from the traditional media? The unique feature of the Internet is its scope for extensive interactivity, and yet the parties have so far failed lamentably to engage interactively with either the public in general or even their own members. This will surely change, with policy deliberation within dispersed national parties taking place far more online. In Hungary, the Liberals have become an online party, running party conferences, leadership elections and members' organisational meetings via their website.

Meaningful interactivity

Feedback is at the core of the democratic potential of the Internet. No information source before the Internet provided such scope for direct responsiveness. Digital communication technologies break down the traditional barrier between producer and consumer; broadcaster and audience. Citizens use the Internet to become informed, but also to inform others. All information becomes susceptible to contestation. Internet users share knowledge about issues that matter to them, ranging from health to travel to recipes to household tips. Participants in these sites tend to be both knowledge seekers and knowledge providers; they respect the experience and expertise of others and expect their own to be respected. But when they go to most Government or Parliament sites they feel peculiarly shut out, as if there could be nothing of value that they could bring to the deliberative process.

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Politicians should resist the delusion that e-democracy is simply about making themselves more transparent to the public. Of course, transparency is central to democracy (and the Internet has a major democratic role to play in political cultures dominated by secrecy, corruption and cover-ups), but e-democracy should amount to more than an online peep-show into the institutions of power. For example, webcasting the proceedings of parliamentary committees is democratically laudable, but there is little evidence that this is what the public wishes to see. MPs' diaries being published online might provide minor added value for journalists, but few citizens are likely to feel much empowered by this. The Internet is more than TV for small audiences. To neglect the two-way path of digital communication is to miss its point.

On those occasions when citizens have been invited into the process of policy deliberation, such as in the online consultations run by the Hansard Society for committees in the British Parliament, their response has been overwhelmingly positive. They move from believing that nobody in authority cares what they think to a greater sense of their own capacity to influence policy.

Early writers about the Internet made much of its tendency towards disintermediation. For some, interactivity came to be identified with synchronicity and the absence of mediating forces. But without mediation, how do people know what information to trust? Without moderation, how does the chatter of countless, competing voices turn into an environment for listening and learning as well as speaking? It is surely a mistake to confuse the immediacy of digital communication with non-mediation. Filtration of online information, and entry barriers to deliberative discussion, should be unrestrictive, transparent and accountable, but they should certainly not be absent. **If citizens are to interact with their representatives and with one another, in a bid to inform and enrich policy and legislation, they are entitled to the protection of fair rules and tested procedures.** If elected representatives and Government are to enter into the public conversation and learn from it, they should have access to trusted (independently produced) summaries of the public's evidence and mood.

Zones of silence – Zones of deafness

The Ugandan MP, Dr. Johnson J. Nkuuhe, has referred to "zones of silence": those areas of the globe which appear to have nothing to say because their populations are so disconnected from influential channels of communication. In response to Nkuuhe, others have spoken of "zones of deafness", referring to areas and institutions which are so used to speaking to themselves that they have lost the means of hearing the voices of others. These are powerful

metaphors, appropriate not only to the **global democratic deficit,** but also to that within nation states and regions.

We have tended to think of public silence mainly within the context of political repression. But, as Fishkin (1991) has argued, not having access to the media of mass communication can also amount to a form of silencing:

> *Crucial voices may fail to achieve an effective hearing without the need to silence any of them. In a modern, technologically complex society, access to the mass media is a necessary condition for a voice to contribute to the national political debate. Unless the media permit the full range of views that have a significant following in the society to get access to the media on issues of intense interest to proponents of those views, then the full realisation of political equality has fallen short.*

The democratic theorist, Zolo (1992), goes further still in theorising the political nature of public silence:

> *…the political effects of mass communication are closely linked with the tendencies towards conformity, apathy and political "silence" which stem not so much from what is said as from what is unsaid, from what the communication filters tacitly exclude from the daily order of public attention. Silence is without doubt the most effective agent for subliminal persuasion in mass communication, and the most suitable instrument for a kind of negative homologisation of an information-based public. The political integration of information-based societies comes about far more through tacit reduction in the complexity of the topics of political communication than through any positive selection or discussion of them.*

How might the Internet, as a new medium of communication, transcend these zones of silence and deafness?

Information as a common resource

Paradoxically, as legislation has provided for greater freedom of information, the technical capacity to privatise and filter the flow information has increased. **Data deprivation is one of the main causes of public silence.** To have a say in the affairs of democracy, citizens need access to the widest possible information, not just mediated messages or headline policy decisions. People need access to the resources that will allow them to make up their own minds.

The Internet could provide a significant means of distributing **information as a common resource.** As Rose (2002) argues, in the context of East Asian governance, the Internet encourages greater openness between government and governed; impersonal rules, so that favouritism and bribery in providing information can be reduced; and continuing accountability to citizens and civil society institutions. The realisation of even some of this

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potential could only serve to strengthen democratic culture. But, as Rose observes:

> *Where governments have little or no accountability, the capacity of the Internet to promote the free flow of information is likely to create frictions between governors and recalcitrant subjects as it offers citizens the means to publicize activities that governors want kept quiet. Friction is likely to be greater where adherence to these norms is currently least, such as Myanmar, where in 1996 government made it illegal to own a modem without permission, and the ownership of the few PCs in the country is mostly in the hands of government and business elites and foreigners. The People's Republic of China is also vulnerable to increased friction, since its Great Fire Wall policy for controlling trans-national flows of political information is at odds with desire for greater integration in the international economy through membership of the World Trade Organisation.*

For democratising countries, the first goal of e-democracy must be information transparency. Where authoritarian governments are resistant to this, the Internet can be used as a channel for whistle-blowing and irrepressible exposure of corruption.

Liberating information will best serve the public if resources are devoted to filtering and **making intelligible the raw material for useful public knowledge.** The Internet, as we know it, is good at allowing users to download "everything", but poor at differentiating between good, bad or obsolete information. Search engines should in theory provide a way of prioritising current, trustworthy information, but what we know about the priorities of these engines suggests that their selection of "top sites" owes more to cultural and political bias than pedagogical or epistemological integrity. A useful recent study found that search engines "systematically exclude (in some cases by design and in some accidentally) certain sites and certain types of sites in favour of others, systematically giving prominence to some at the expense of others" (Introna and Nissenbaum, 2000). Addressing – and possibly regulating – these biases is far more important for the future of e-democracy than simply allowing freedom of expression to flourish within unknown websites which perish undetected in the vast metropolis of the World Wide Web.

Promoting excluded voices

Active efforts must be made to attract the widest range of voices possible and to monitor the ways in which different social groups are making their voices heard online. The disabled, people who do not use English as a first language, young people, senior citizens and those who are not confident, either with the technology or in dealing with Government, need to be encouraged and helped to use digital technologies in order to be better connected to Government and representatives. There would be little point in

utilising new channels of communication in order to hear from the same people who have tended to be most vocal in traditional consultations. **A key purpose of e-participation is to create opportunities to be heard for those who are not usually part of the policy process.**

E-participation must involve more than simply setting up a discussion forum and hoping that people will use it. Experimentation with online consultations that have purposely sought to include the non-usual suspects suggests that there are ways of flattening hierarchies online, by creating less intimidating and more expansive spaces for public deliberation (See Coleman and Normann, 2000; Hall, 2002). Designing inclusive, accessible, usable and welcoming spaces is just as much a requirement of democracy as universal access to the Internet – and achieving such an end has more to do with social psychology and graphic design than engineering or programming.

Promoting inclusion requires a degree of inventiveness in facilitating different types of public input to democratic debate, including that which is experiential and anecdotal. Storytelling and Web logging offer interesting alternatives to traditional consultation submissions (Coleman and Gotze, 2001).

Representing geography

Democracy is rooted, if not always territorially, then by communal ties of interest and passion. Real-world places can be replicated and shifted in cyberspace; for example, the numerous US and European-based newsgroups for Iranians, Chinese, Kurds, Arabs and other groups for whom national identity is best expressed beyond their national borders. But too much of what takes place online is rootless and lacking in cultural identity. Too often there is an assumption that the cyber-represented world is monolingual and monocultural; those outside its narrow nucleus, for reasons of linguistic, cultural or economic difference, are urged to integrate or lurk in silence. How often has one witnessed French, Spanish or German messages in British or American newsgroups or discussion fora treated as being disruptive or self-obsessed? Yet cyberspace is the quintessential space of a globalised society: it is perfectly suited to the kind of transnational and cross-cultural discussions that have been elusive in the past.

The Internet could be developed to facilitate a form of **communicative subsidiarity,** where public deliberation is conducted at its appropriate level, depending on circumstances. So, there could be local discussions as well as regional, national, continental and global ones. Geo-spatial data systems could help to sort out the sources and backgrounds of discussion contributors, so that there would be a capacity to track what particular demographic groups are saying – or not saying. As well as territorial communication, communities of interest and practice could be linked on the same basis.

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In short, cyberspace needs to reflect the global map as it is now, whilst unblocking the gulfs and chasms born of economic and cultural inequality. Authentically global debate could be facilitated. Those who have become frustrated by years of silence shall be invited as equals into the global conversation; those who have grown self-absorbed and arrogant shall be encouraged to listen. This is not a recipe for peace and harmony on earth, but at least it recognises that the most complete democracy involves the whole planet rather than small islands within it.

Towards a policy for e-democracy

Politicians are beginning to realise that connecting directly with the citizens they represent can lead to better policy-making and legislation, informed by public experience and expertise; a new kind of relationship between government and governed, based upon politicians' listening, learning and sharing ideas as well as steering and aggregating; and the reward of enhanced public confidence in democratic institutions and the renewed legitimacy of governance. The former Canadian Finance Minister, Paul Martin, has said that, "Governments must use new technologies such as the Internet to empower citizens and provide them with a greater ability to scrutinize and influence government decisions and actions." (Martin, 2001) Robin Cook, former Leader of the UK House of Commons, has committed himself to the e-democracy agenda, stating that, "We need not accept the paradox that gives us more ways than ever to speak, and leaves the public with a wider feeling than ever before that their voices are not being heard. The new technologies can strengthen our democracy, by giving us greater opportunities than ever before for better transparency and a more responsive relationship between government and electors." (Cook, 2002).

But what exactly is an e-democracy policy? There would be little point in developing such a policy unless it involved using Internet and other digital technologies to seriously reinvigorate existing democratic practices. E-democracy as a tokenistic policy, designed to show government as being e-friendly and to facilitate politically meaningless opportunities for the public to "have a say", would only discredit the relationship between the Internet and democracy.

A successful e-democracy policy should embrace the following principles:

- Create **new public spaces** for political interaction and deliberation. There is a shortage of such space in the offline environment; online offers significant advantages for the cultivation of effective public discussion and deliberation areas.
- Provide for a **multi-directional, interactive communications flow,** designed to connect citizens, representatives and the executive with one another. It

is important to differentiate between the layers of C2R (parliamentary, devolved assembly, regional or local assembly, community, European); the various, not always connected aspects of C2G; and the democratic necessity of enabling C2C.

- **Integrate e-democratic processes** within broader constitutional structures and developments.
- Ensure that interaction between citizens, their elected representatives and government is meaningful. If public input is being invited into the policy or legislative process, ensure that it is **effectively facilitated and summarised** and that response mechanisms exist so that representatives and government can listen and learn.
- Ensure that there is a sufficiency of **high-quality online information** so that citizens can consider policy options on the basis of trusted knowledge, as well as their own subjective experiences. Such information needs to be accessible, intelligible and not overwhelming.
- If the public voice is to be heard more clearly and more often, this must involve **efforts to recruit the widest range of public voices** to the democratic conversation, including those who are traditionally marginalised, disadvantaged or unheard.
- Reflect the realities of geography and social structure within online environments, with a view to providing **equal access to the democratic process** for all areas and all communities.

Beyond the rhetorical discourse of metaphor, hyperbole and disconnected futurology, there is scope for a radical policy agenda in the sphere of e-democracy. E-democracy should not be conceived as a panacea for all the flaws of political democracy and social communication. But it does hold out hope of contributing to the development of two incomplete historical projects: the Internet and democracy.

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