On the Road from Consultation Cynicism to Energising e-Consultation

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Abstract: A major concern in recent political discourse is that government has become both isolated from and unresponsive to its citizens. Democracy, by definition, demands a two-way flow of communication between government and civil society. ICTs have the potential to facilitate such improved flows of communication — hence, e-democracy and e-consultation. This paper initially draws on focus group discussions on the theme of e-consultation conducted amongst activist citizens on the island of Ireland. High levels of frustration, scepticism and cynicism were expressed on the form, nature and process of extant consultation processes. In follow-up demonstrations, however, the preliminary findings are much more positive suggesting that the potential exists for using e-consultation technologies to enhance democratic processes.

Keywords: consultation, e-consultation technologies, e-democracy, e-government

1. Introduction

A major concern in recent political discourse is that government has become both isolated from and unresponsive to its citizenry. Democracy, by definition, demands a two-way flow of communication between government and civil society (Habermas, 1996). It is now commonly argued that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have the potential to facilitate such improved flows of communication, information and feedback—hence, e-democracy and e-consultation. Coleman (2005) argues that the "decline in public engagement is best understood in the context of radical changes in public attitudes towards democratic institutions and actors, specifically attitudes of trust and efficacy". This paper draws on focus group discussions on the theme of consultation conducted in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. High levels of frustration and scepticism were expressed on the form, nature and process of extant consultation processes (McCusker et al., 2005). The main focus addressed in this paper, however, is on how these citizens envisage ICT being used in future e-consultations. In general, most focus group participants were open to the use of ICT in future e-consultation processes but the consensus was that community groups did not currently have access to an appropriate level or range of infrastructure, technologies or skills. As a follow up to the focus group findings the research

group ran a number of demonstrations on e-consultation technologies with invited activist citizens. Technologies introduced included chat room, video-conferencing, WikiPedia, WebIQ, Zing and others. The main preliminary findings and feedback from one such demonstration, and our own observations, are then presented which suggest that the potential does exist for using e-consultation technologies in local democracy and in local government to drive positive change in the government-citizen relationship. It is acknowledged here that ICT alone is very unlikely to be a panacea for the declining levels of citizen participation in most democratic societies.

This paper evaluates the evolving system of consultation and examines the case for increased use of ICTs to further enhance the process of policy creation. The issue is - if the majority of interests in Irish society use e-consultation will this improve citizen participation in public discourse and what will it mean for democracy? The potential for government to utilise ICT to create new channels for representative democracy that encourages effective participation is tentatively assessed relative to the current system. In the following sections of the paper we provide some insights from our discussions with 'activist' citizens from the 'institutional core' of Irish civil society—both North and South—on how they perceive the role of ICT in future e-consultation processes and

on how they reacted when provided with the opportunity of testing some of them out.

2. On e-democracy in context

Citizens simultaneously occupy two positions in democratic society: they are both members of society and the bearers of the political public sphere (Habermas, 1996). As members of society, citizens are exposed to the requirements, benevolence and failures of the corresponding service systems—such systems viewed here as the primary responsibility of government—whether supranational, national, regional or local. Private spheres and local community lifeworlds, in turn, link to the public spheres of deliberative democracy—the threshold separating these spheres being marked, according to Habermas, not "by a fixed set of issues or relationships but by different conditions of communication" that channel the flow of communication from one to the other (McCusker et al., 2005). In this paper we begin to explore how such "flows of communication" might occur in future e-consultation by drawing on insights from discussions on both 'real world' consultation processes and on a demonstration of e-consultation technologies. These are preliminary elements in a larger ongoing research project on e-consultation on the island of Ireland (see http://e-consultation.org).

The jury remains out on the potential of ICTs in enhancing the quality of the democratic process. Leitner (2003), for example, views ICT as facilitating the evolution of a "modern citizen-centered, co-operative, seamless, polycentric way of governance". This optimistically signals radical change across the entire range of state/administrative-citizen relationships where "the measurement of the centrality of the citizen is the key aim to be achieved through assessing the ability of modern technologies to create seamless responsive and citizen-centric government for the benefit of all" (Information Society Commission, 2003). In the Irish Republic, neo-corporatist partnership has provided a basis for sustained economic and social progress since 1987; and Northern Ireland is now benefiting economically from the ongoing 'peace process' although political and institutional development is lagging somewhat behind. The 'Better Local Government Program for Change' (2000), to take one example, recognised the need for local government to embrace new concepts of partnership and participation involving all relevant interest groups through the use of innovative means—such as ICT. In many peripheral areas that are distant from the central administrative hubs in Belfast, Dublin and London citizens feel isolated and, in

terms of access, excluded from much of the public sphere. A further complication here is the fact that the devolved Stormont Assembly in Belfast is not, as yet, fully functioning. Our research finds high levels of frustration, cynicism and apathy directed towards extant consultation processes across the island of Ireland. The advent of ICT and the possibly of an 'ambient intelligent environment' is not viewed by these 'activist' citizens as *the* solution to current difficulties. Many of the focus group participants responded negatively to the fact that the use of ICT might remove face-to-face contact, their preferred consultation medium, thus isolating them further from the workings of government. The findings presented below on a demonstration of e-consultation technologies is, however, more positive. Moreover, a major obstacle to incorporating ICT in the democratic relationship is that many marginalised groups and areas have neither the requisite skills or infrastructure to utilise an ICT based system. Governmental broadband initiatives are initially driven by economic, as distinct from citizen-centric public sphere, imperatives. Those areas that already experience infrastructural deficiencies simply fall further behind. Focus group discussants acknowledged, however, that current difficulties with time, cost and long-distance travel would be reduced if the majority made ICT more accessible and usable.

The use of ICT in consultation is not a new phenomenon; the availability of online e-Government services aimed at both businesses and private households in Ireland already exist but potential users as regularly as in other areas of Europe are not accessing them. For example, a Euro barometer survey found that the Irish Republic had the second lowest number of Internet users visiting e-Government sites. Only thirty percent of potential users assessed such sites compared with an EU average of forty nine per cent (Williams et al., 2004). During a period when plans for e-government were being developed the digital divide has widened in the Irish Republic compared to a relatively stagnant rate among the EU15 (at the time of research). This conflicts with the overly simplistic view that "technical obstacles to full participation have been solved by the revolution in computer communications technology" (Lyon, 1998). Northern Ireland's 'broadband for all' initiative is ahead here. It is not necessarily the case that citizen participation in democratic societies follows the introduction of new technologies.

Internationally, many governments—not all democratic—have already developed some of the potential of ICT in facilitating the emergence of the 'ambient intelligent' environment (Davis 2002,

OECD 2003) including e-consultation (Coleman et al., 2002, Morison and Newman, 2001). Moreover, the literatures on both public policy analysis and on deliberative democracy advocate an increase in public engagement in decision-making processes that directly affects them (Flyvbjerg 1998; Habermas 1996; Hamlett 2003; Macintosh, 2004; Morison, 2004; O'Donnell and Henriksen, 2002). Examples here include the general 'modernising government' agenda in the UK, the modernising policies for service delivery in Finland, Irish strategies on the 'Information Society', and the Northern Ireland and Swedish drives to upgrade infrastructure through their 'broadband everywhere' targets. Just as some have unrealistic expectations of the efficiency gains and cost savings resulting from e-government initiatives there is also a belief in some quarters that the Internet is an open and inherently democratic medium. It follows, from this line of reasoning, that when governments 'go online' they will immediately and automatically become more open which in turn will improve the quality of (e)democracy. This discourse is somewhat one sided and the argument is both naïve and overly simplistic. That said, extant e-consultation successes must be acknowledged: Webocracy (Wolverhampton), Madrid Participa, the Colorful Flanders project, the Roundtable initiative in Manitoba, and the Queensland initiative to name but a few. However, such ICT mediated improvements are in no way inevitable. e-Government does not necessarily correlate with e-Democracy. Further, the scope for mere replication of current problems means that future systems may need to change not only the medium through which consultation processes are conducted but also move deeper into the processes and practices of deliberative democracy itself (McCusker et al., 2005).

3. Methodology

In total, eight ~one hour focus group discussions on the theme of consultation were conducted between November of 2004 and January of 2005—six in the Republic of Ireland and two in Northern Ireland. Focus group methodologies have a good track record in conducting research with community groups in Ireland (McCusker, 1998). The main focus was on 'consultation' as distinct from 'e-consultation' as the research group believed that this was a key first step in grasping relevant insights to direct further more specific research (and development) on e-consultation, and perhaps lead to useful theoretical insights emerging (see http://econsult.mgt.qub.ac.uk/Theory and http://e-consultation.org where the reader is cordially invited to join in the discussions). The ongoing

and final results of this research project are forwarded to key policy makers on the island of Ireland. One focus group was female only with the others reasonably balanced between male and female participants; 44 citizens participated in total—21 male and 23 female. These were taped and transcribed generating in excess of 100,000 words. Participants were generally 'activist' citizens from the 'institutional core' within their communities such as community activists, members of voluntary organisations, youth groups, training groups, peace groups, needs of the elderly, disability action, and rural development. Our findings, therefore, relate to the perceptions and experiences of such 'activist' citizens—as the citizenry as a whole generally does not participate in such consultation processes. Based on the initial insights gained from the focus groups and survey data from the broader community it was decided to conduct some demonstration workshops on e-consultation technologies. We also present some very preliminary findings on one such set of demonstrations here, others are ongoing at time of writing, and the next phase is to make active use of these technologies in real situations, also ongoing at time of writing. Again, the participants invited were activist citizens.

4. Focus group discussions

Despite the notable levels of cynicism and frustration expressed, these citizens believe in consultation as a valuable exercise that can generate more detailed and relevant information than other methods of information gathering (see McCusker et al., 2005). This is the main insight followed up in the demonstrations of e-consultation technologies outlined below. Consultation allows participants the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns on issues and, when well conducted, can foster a spirit of partnership resulting in enhanced decision-making, better policy-making and more socially acceptable outcomes. Throughout, face-to-face consultation was viewed as the optimal medium.

> *"…the underlying important thing about any consultation ... if it's properly structured and you have the, shall we say, correct range of people there ... it's not just an opportunity to have everything on the table and move your project forward, it's also an opportunity to dig your heels in and say 'hang on are we going the right way here, do we need to step back' and I think ... sort of ... the important thing there is how you set up the consultation".*

In general, most participants were open to the use of technology in the consultation process; however, the consensus was that community

groups did not currently have access to either an appropriate level or range of either technologies or skills. Existing infrastructure is not up to the standard required to facilitate the use of technology. The main concern relates to issues of access, economics and ICT skills—would people be required to buy a computer and pay for internet connections? What about those who aren't computer literate; will training be offered? Who will pay for it? People who are distrustful of technology may become further marginalised. In theory, ICT should allow everyone the option and the opportunity to participate, but policy makers must be cognisant of those who can't/won't use it. The key theme was that technology in its various forms should be viewed as an additional resource rather than as a solution to current difficulties. In certain instances technologies such as public access points may increase citizen participation on certain issues especially if they are located centrally. Of course this technique is limited and points to the need for creativity when incorporating ICT into discursive processes. A major obstacle to both e-government provision and to the practice of e-democracy is that many marginalised groups and geographical areas have neither the technologically-savvy skills or local infrastructures to access ICT based systems—whether these be e-consultation or otherwise with the most recent comprehensive study of ICT in the Republic of Ireland, finding that:

> *... the main digital divide among private individuals relates to divergences between groups defined in terms of education, social class, age and economic status. Age and education are possibly the most important structural dimensions of potential e-exclusion (Williams et al., 2004).*

Participants wanted investment in training and infrastructure prioritised with the focus on reducing the digital divide, hence reducing marginalisation. It was suggested that mobile training suites might be a cost effective way of providing training and access. The scheme envisages a trainer and several laptops visiting community centres and so on and offering training across a wide geographical area thus bringing training to those who would otherwise remain marginalised. A further concern was the reliability of technology, an issue tied to investment and again emphasising the need for new and upgraded modes. Most participants agreed that technology is a useful way of overcoming the problems of distance and time currently associated with consultation methods: "It has tremendous potential I just don't think it has been explored properly". Most participants, however, expressed a very strong preference for actual face-to-face contact with the consulter "… to see the whites of their eyes". Many reported feeling

marginalised from government/funding bodies and cautioned on the possibility of technology creating new divides. Whatever the method, participants need to know exactly what the consultation process is about; that is, motives, desired outcomes and crucially the purpose that their views will be put to. One of the key findings relates to detailed feedback at all stages; government should not just ask for information and ignore participants' input when the process is over, as appears to regularly happen. Participants demand to be given the opportunity to say whether they agree with the findings and the end product or service.

The following recommendations on future e-consultations were generated from a preliminary analysis of the eight focus group discussions/transcripts:

1. Maximising inclusion must be central to future e-consultation.
2. Provide pre-consultation ICT training.
3. Create and widely circulate detailed time plans.
4. Provide a suitable contact person to deal with queries or difficulties.
5. Be flexible with methods and techniques.
6. Tailor time and settings to participants' needs.
7. Provide structured and thoughtful feedback mechanisms.
8. Allow freedom of access to all information collected.
9. Provide low cost ICT.
10. Offer technical support.

This extended list indicates the strong level of frustration with current consultation processes that are characterised by an absence of one or more of the elements noted above. The possible future role of ICT in e-consultation, albeit broadly if not over-enthusiastically welcomed, is not seen as the solution here to many of the major concerns put forward during the focus group discussions. One summed up the situation very succinctly:

> *"I wouldn't see it as the be all and end all of everything to be honest with you. I would think that it could be just one additional mechanism in relation to a range of options that could be used".*

Participants generally responded that conducting consultations via electronic means is a good idea:

> *"People thought it was a great idea when your council meetings were … web-cast. Everyone would ... you know ... be able to actually watch them in action and everything … and video conferencing works really well".*

"I think that it might be very useful in a very kind of more detailed structured consultation, maybe small focus groups, more kind of in-depth".

"…because it meant I could sit at home at night and do it in my time - it didn't mean that every Tuesday night I had to head to Magee or head to Letterkenny or wherever I could work …".

However, they qualified this belief by noting that e-consultation would also create new problems in practice, and more critically if implicitly, that extant fundamental problems would simply be replicated in electronic mode, which would do absolutely nothing to enhance either the quality of extant consultation processes or, indeed, the democratic process itself (McCusker et al., 2005). Many of the participants acknowledged that current difficulties with time, cost and long-distance travel would be greatly reduced if ICT were both accessible and usable by the majority of citizens. This is a useful finding in terms of the dynamics and processes, whatever about content and actual influence, of future e-consultation processes—and this is strengthened by the findings from the demonstrations outlined in the following section. Participants want consultation to be a meaningful exercise—not simply a meaningless rubber-stamping legislative and procedural requirement—but they perceive changes in current practices and processes as far more important than the mere introduction of new consultation media. This signals to us that the lifeworld process of deliberative democracy may be a better point of departure for thinking about future e-consultation processes than instrumental system dictates, whether e-Government or e-Administration (McCusker et al., 2005).

5. Demonstration of e-consultation technologies

Based on the initial insights gained from the focus groups, and survey data from the broader community, it was decided to conduct some demonstration workshops on e-consultation technologies. We present some very preliminary findings on one such set of demonstrations here, others are ongoing at time of writing and the next phase is to make active use of these technologies in real situations, also ongoing at time of writing. These took place in mid-June 2005 at a small computer lab (12 PCs), and as noted above, the participants were activist citizens. The participants all received a handout, which included examples of the various technologies that were available for use in consultation. Beginning at 10.00 am the format adopted is as follows:

I. Introduction – (10.00-10-20) In the first 20 minutes the group were given a brief presentation on the background to the project and the findings from the focus groups. We asked the participants to write a brief note on a consultation problem that they faced. In terms of session outcomes we asked participants to consider how the technologies they observed and used would affect a consultation process in terms of - Participation, Engagement, Interest, Creativity, Cost, Resources, Time/Space, and Security.

I. Supporting Dialogue and Discussion (10.20 – 11.15)

    a. Real Time (Chat rooms and Video Conferencing): Example – Belfast school kids and hands-on using Breeze

    b. Ongoing (Discussion Forums and e-Mail lists): Example – (Dublin.ie and hands-on practice with a forum built on the project site. Topics included the impact of the Donegal Rally, getting to LY Institute of Technology, and so on)

I. Structured Communication (11.30 – 12.30)

    a. Describe three types:

    b. Writing Documents: Example - Wikipedia and hands-on session at creating and editing a document based on the participants' experiences at work.

    c. Measuring needs and preferences: Example – simple example, style and format of questions. PhP surveyor for survey management and hands-on session.

    d. Exploring problems: Examples of WebIQ and Zing followed by hands-on session with WebIQ. Brainstorming issues on using ICT and then ranking them

II. Practical Consultation (12.30 – 1.00)

    a. Review of problem statements

    b. Small group solution generation.

General Observations

▪ Some participants seemed to be using the software without looking at what the demonstrator was doing or the screen. The demonstrators went around the room helping those with problems.

▪ Participants appeared totally engrossed in the technology during the hands-on sessions and appeared content in exploring the different functions of the software.

- There were many animated conversations going on, participants were networking with each other and discussing the technology (much to the satisfaction(relief) of the demonstrators/authors).
- Participants with initial difficulties availed of additional one-to-one help; but from there on appeared to have little difficulty in using the e-consultation technologies themselves.
- After a relevantly short period of time participants were asking their neighbours questions in addition to asking the facilitator/demonstrator.
- Participants quickly lost interest in the verbal demonstration preferring to use the time for 'hands-on' use of the technology.

Reactions and Body Language

- Initially participants seemed open to viewing the various technologies but skeptical of their usability.
- They were obviously confused whenever technical language was used.
- They responded positively to the examples provided - Dublin Community Forum and the examples of on-line surveys.
- They really enjoyed using the technology hands-on and once started they had little difficulty completing the tasks.
- If/when there was a technical difficulty their original scepticism appeared to return.

Responses from the Feedback Sheets

- They were willing to use the technology for both 'issue based' and 'policy based' consultation depending on software and training availability.
- We would need to access the usability for our partners and target audience.
- Not every consultation would lend itself to using ICT technologies.
- Need to have an ICT assistant available.
- Huge potential for use as a complement to existing consultation methods.
- Provision of information to over 250 groups.
- Lack of consistent Internet connection (i.e. no broadband). The result is that no matter how good the software is, it is vulnerable to connection speed and so on. (note this is a largely rural area with limited access to broadband and this finding was also strongly emphasised in the focus group discussions noted above).
- Develop a resource (website) that allows organisations to network.
- E-forums that appeal to different ages and social groupings.

- Engage and raise awareness of issues with large dispersed groups.
- Consult about training needs.
- See the potential but unable, as yet, to see how it could be really leveraged.
- Lack of time to physically meet and brief other groups in this particular region.
- The size of geographical area to be managed.
- Co-ordination of part-time classes/learning across a region without the need to be physically present.
- Just over one third of participants had previous experience with e-consultation.

What was encouraging about the technologies?

- Usability √√√ (4 out of 5).
- Value for money compared to traditional approaches.
- Speed.
- Scope and range of responses possible.
- Time savings (compiles results as you go along).
- Optimistic that such technologies would increase involvement.
- Simple, cheap, easy to use.

What was discouraging about the technologies?

- Lack of access to training.
- Difficulty of usability.
- Impact on resources i.e. could one justify/prioritise the expense.
- Need for readily available assistance.
- Not suitable in all cases.
- Tracing respondents.
- Technical problems and break-downs.

Viewpoints on the demonstration of e-Consultation technologies. Some positive comments from the participants:

"The examples of best practice were good in that they showed what could be done … but also that you could do it."

"It is hard to figure out what is happening when you're just hearing technical terms that are thrown at you, but once you start to use the software you get the hang of it very quickly."

"I think it's important to be able to use the technology at your own level for your own needs rather than be an expert. It's like a website - you need to understand it, use it and explain it to others but you don't need to be able to build a website from scratch.

To that extent I would imagine easily accessible technical support is vital."

"Once I started to use Web IQ you could see how it would be great for meetings. It makes it so easy to provide input and see what others are saying and thinking. The results are available much quicker and there is transparency."

And some negatives comments:

"It was too easy to get lost and I would be wary of showing these technologies to people who are unfamiliar with computers and the internet."

"Even in a state-of-the-art lab with experts the technology failed and the connections proved unreliable. Working in remote areas with outdated infrastructure this problem would be a real obstacle. We rarely get a chance to contact our funder or partners so with the current technical problems I can't imagine opting for ICT based techniques."

Views of the demonstrators:

"If ever there was an example of learning by doing it was the demonstration. Talking in techno-speak seems to really confuse the participants. Terms like 'WikiWiki' are really off putting, but once they (participants) start to use the Wiki pages they relax and start asking questions (…) like can I do this and what happens if I or someone else changes this."

"It's fair to say that, despite my initial mild skepticism, by the end participants felt that at least some of the (e-consultation) technologies on display were useful, useable and accessible."

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

What can we learn on the future potential of e-consultation from the two sets of findings presented here? The communicative rationality of local lifeworlds (EU Commission 2003; Habermas 1996; Macintosh, 2004; McCusker et al., 2005; Morison and Newman, 2001; O'Donnell and Henriksen, 2002) may, theoretically, be communicated by citizens via e-consultation processes and technologies—with the purpose of influencing decision-making processes and public policy that directly affects them. The rationale for a radical overhaul is the democratic ideal of 'partnership and participation'. No single actor (public, private or voluntary) has the information or resources to tackle all problems either efficiently or effectively. To enhance democracy, however, it is imperative that effective consultation takes place enabling a worthwhile transfer of ideas and concerns from the bottom-up. Although not the solution to all the current difficulties, ICT does offer the ability to dramatically improve the process in terms of access and information flow. The findings presented here range from the initial scepticism and cynicism emanating from the face-to-face focus group discussions to the much more optimistic experiential experiences of participants once they interacted with a range of e-consultation technologies in a hands-on manner. One aspect of this transition is the need to incorporate technical advances into political life in such a way as to provide citizens with a more central role in both policy-making and decision-making processes. eGovernment is defined by the Commission of the European Communities (2003) as "the use of (ICT) in public administration combined with organisational change and new skills in order to improve public services and democratic processes while strengthening support for policies". It follows that organisational change and upskilling must be addressed by both central and local government agencies if the aspirations of present programmes are to be achieved—otherwise they will remain precisely that—mere aspirations. The preliminary findings from the demonstrations suggest that the former aspects of this are possible – whatever about their future influence on policy.

Changing the methodology of consultation may also make available to local authorities and local councillors a framework and opportunity within which to fulfil their roles as policy makers. The development of opportunities for partnership with local interest groups may assist in the formation of a bottom up approach. A variation in techniques may provide better communication, co-operation and consensus between all parties involved. Maximising the potential of ICT may enhance democracy by pooling resources, and by spreading workloads and areas of responsibility. Focusing on partnership may remove the time delays associated with individuals working in isolation. It may also assist by more clearly defining the various roles between central and local government and citizens and other interest groups or stakeholders. The use of the qualifier 'may' in all of our concluding sentences here is intentional and signals that there is much yet to discover and do before present aspirations on e-consultation become future working realities. That said, moving from the rather negative findings on extant consulation processes there is much that is positive in the feedback from participants on the hands-on demonstration of e-consultation technologies. The next phase of this research

agenda is now happening – some of these e-consulation technologies are now in use in real consultation processes on the island of Ireland.

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