

# Citizen Consultations via Government Web Sites

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## INTRODUCTION

Cynicism toward government is largely a function of trust and social capital (Berman 1997; Putnam 2000). The relationship between government and its citizens has been strained. First, some citizens cynically feel as though government officials abuse their powers in the interest of self-aggrandizement; second, citizens often feel disconnected from government; third, government service delivery is frequently portrayed as inadequate. Administrative strategies to reverse these perceptions typically emphasize the benefits of government and improved service delivery. Some go further, offering individuals a means of influencing public policy and government decision-making, as opposed to traditional structures and cultures of policymaking that minimize citizen input. The Internet is a potentially powerful means for citizen consultation, and may help cultivate a governmental landscape in which information is more accessible, people feel more connected to government, and citizens are better able to participate in political and decision-making processes. This article examines the Internet as a consultative medium, whereby emphasis is placed on government efforts to use Web-based applications as a means of promoting meaningful citizen participation.

## DIGITAL DEMOCRACY: A THEORETICAL EXAMINATION

According to John Stuart Mill (1991), the ideal public sphere is one where debate and differences of opinion flourish. Integrating diverse groups into the public discourse helps to engender and sustain societal stability. Mill advocated tolerance for alternative views points, even those that are thought to be socially deviant, thus minimizing the likelihood of social tyranny and preserving individual autonomy. Mill envisioned a public sphere in which the masses assemble in civic spaces and engage in a pluralistic discourse, helping to prevent ignorance and

prejudices from unduly influencing the policy-making process.

Public realm theorists such as Habermas (1989) emphasize the importance of social mechanisms that allow private individuals to pass judgment on public acts. Habermas provides a historical description of European social institutions throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, namely the English coffee houses, German literary societies and the salons of France. These institutions brought together generic intellectuals and created forums for debate regarding the state of society. According to Habermas (1984), the ideal public arena fosters inclusive and voluntary citizen participation within the context of influencing how government power is wielded. Today, the notion of digital democracy has been championed by some as a means of realizing Mill and Habermas' conceptions of the ideal public sphere. The notion of digital democracy encompasses the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in the practice of democracy.

In the context of a democratic system, citizens have a measure of influence over the policies impacting their lives. The relationship between government and citizens is foremost within a democratic system. In a digital democracy, emphasis is placed on the processes and structures that define the relationships between government and citizens, between elected officials and appointees, and between the legislative and the executive branches of government. According to Hacker and van Dijk (2000, p. 1), digital democracy refers to "a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using ICTs or computer-mediated communication instead as an addition, not a replacement for, traditional 'analogue' political practices." Nugent (2001, p. 223) refers to digital democracy as "processes carried out online—communicating with fellow citizens and elected representatives about politics." Digital democracy may be defined as all practices to improve democratic values using ICTs.

Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Kouzmin (2003) maintains that ICTs and digital applications may alter the

dynamic of representative democracy by affording citizens a direct means of influencing the public policymaking process. This may include virtual town hall meetings, online consultation portals, and other Internet-based applications where citizens can debate policy and convey their views. Given the rapid development of ICTs, citizens can participate more freely and consult on public policies (Holzer, Melitski, Rho, & Schwester, 2004).

O'Looney (2002) compares the interaction between citizens and government within the context of traditional and digital democracy. According to O'Looney, while communications are filtered through representatives and the media in a traditional democracy, direct communications among citizens, public managers, and technical staff are now possible in a digital democracy. Communications with citizens involve a one-message-fits-all approach in a traditional democracy. Within a digital democracy, official communications may be personalized based on an individual's interests and needs, and citizens can potentially track and influence decision-making at every step in the policy making process, ranging from agenda setting to a final vote. Further, government openness and transparency are central components to digital democracy. The integration of Internet-based applications that allow citizens to obtain information and consult on specific policies may prove ideal in terms of fostering an increased sense of public engagement. This, in turn, may help to reduce citizen cynicism and restore a healthier level of trust in government.

## **INTERNET-BASED CONSULTATIONS: NOTEWORTHY EXAMPLES**

Governments throughout the world are increasingly using the Internet as a means of engaging citizens (Holzer & Kim 2004). Internet applications have the potential to reconnect citizens and decision-makers, publicizing views presented by consultative parties, and providing greater opportunities for citizens to influence public policy. In the context of this discussion, Internet-based consultations are broadly defined as applications that allow individuals to convey their opinions regarding specific policy considerations. Internet-based consultative mediums need not be deliberative or dialogical in nature, even though this would be more ideal.

Jankowski and van Os (2002) examined Internet-based political discourse in the City of Hoogeveen (Netherlands). Established in 1996, *Hoogeveen Digital City* serves as the formal Web site for the municipality, and is considered one of the more advanced community networks in the context of engaging citizens in digital-based

politically oriented discussions. Hoogeveen experimented with three specific Internet-based discussions: (1) the digital consultation hour, (2) digital debate, and (3) digital discussion platform. The digital consultation hour is a bimonthly discussion of community issues. It is a synchronous, real-time exchange between Hoogeveen elected officials and citizens, and it is facilitated through a question and answer format. The digital debate was a real-time event used during the 2002 municipal elections wherein citizens were able to deliberate policy issues and pose questions to candidates and party representatives. Finally, the digital discussion platform is an online public space that allows citizens registered within the network to discuss predetermined community issues.

The *Virginia Regulatory Town Hall* is a public space that affords citizens a means of becoming actively involved in the rulemaking process, as they are able to convey their opinions and concerns via an electronic comment form (which resembles a Microsoft word document). As of October 2004, forty proposed regulatory changes were open for comment. The Town Hall further provides citizens with information regarding proposed regulations and changes, agency background discussions, economic impact analyses of proposed regulations, and agency guidance documents, all of which are designed to help citizens interpret agency regulations, and better ensure knowledgeable citizen participation in the rulemaking process. The public may access regulations by subject, title, cabinet secretariat, agency, and board. Moreover, the Town Hall provides citizens with information on meetings and public hearings, which includes:

- Meeting title
- Host agency and its Web site
- Date and location of the meeting
- Purpose of the meeting
- Agenda and minutes
- Information on handicapped accessibility and deaf interpreters
- Meeting contact information, including name, address, phone number, and e-mail.

Information regarding regulatory actions and meetings is disseminated via email to those having registered with the Town Hall.

Similar to the Virginia Regulatory Town Hall, *Regulations.gov* allows citizens to submit electronic comments regarding proposed federal regulatory changes. Since its development, *Regulations.gov* has averaged approximately 6,000 hits daily (Miller, 2003) and has established itself as a key component of the digital rule-making initiative by improving quality and access to the government regulation writing process. According to Neil Eisner,

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