A Model Building Tool to Support Group Deliberation (eDelib): A Research Note

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A significant area within e-government is concerned with systems to support democratic policy formation and decision making processes. In modern government, both local and national, consultation with interested parties is an important element in maintaining the democratic process. To date, online consultation tools have used existing software tools, which are simple text based tools that were not tailored to the process. This project proposes to investigate to what extent a model building tool can be developed to support group deliberation and consensus building in consultation. Using discourse analysis, computer supported argument visualisation, and ontological engineering it will create argument maps that will serve not only to inform participants but also act as an archival record of the consultation. We hypothesise that a model building tool can be designed to constructively encourage informed debate and deliberation on policy issues by a broad public.

Keywords: argument maps; consultation; discourse analysis; document archiving; eparticipation; political engagement

ORGANISATION BACKGROUND

This research proposal is concerned with information and knowledge management for evidence-based policy making, and motivated by a need to improve ICT support for online consultation processes within the public sector. Both eDemocracy and knowledge management have been identified as particular interests within the EPSRC Network for eGovernment Integration and Systems Evaluation (eGISE).

Much of the work of government relates to the preparation of policy that requires widespread discussion and engagement with civic society, citizens as individuals, and
elected representatives. Over the last decade there has been a gradual awareness of the need to consider new tools for public engagement that enable a wider audience to contribute to the democratic debate. There is also a need for the contributions themselves to be both broader and deeper. Promoting and enabling informed citizen participation in such policy formation activities—eParticipation—is seen as an essential element of eDemocracy. However, online consultative policy making raises a number of challenges for interactive interfaces and information management.

Democratic political participation must involve both the means to be informed and deliberative mechanisms to take part in the decision making. Deliberative eParticipation is an information intensive process, which needs to be interactive, incremental, and dynamic. It requires meaningful messages to be extracted and represented from large assemblages of information produced by multiple stakeholders often with conflicting agendas.

The proposed research explores the use of discourse analysis, computer supported argument visualisation (CSAV), and ontological engineering to create argument maps to enable a dynamic computer supported archive that both records and supports online deliberative consultative in policy making.

**SETTING THE STAGE**

Researchers from political science argue that while needing to retain representatives, there is an added need to consider participatory representative models of democracy that allow civil society to do more than just vote for their representative every four years (Coleman, 2005).

Held (1996) proposes five criteria (based on the work of Dahl) that need to be satisfied to achieve informed citizen participation. Of these five criteria, two are particularly relevant for deliberation. These are:

- **Effective participation**: Citizens must have adequate and equal opportunities to form their preferences, to place questions on the public agenda, and to express reasons for affirming one outcome rather than another
- **Enlightened understanding**: Citizens must enjoy ample and equal opportunities for discovering and affirming what choice in a matter before them would best serve their interests (p. 310)

Held goes on to argue that without these conditions, citizens will not only continue to be disengaged but also not have the informed capability to participate in group discussion on such policy issues. The type of online environment provided for such engagement needs to foster deliberation and allow for evolving argument development where citizens will bring opposing views and contradictions. However, placing a premium on comments that are well thought out also raises the bar of participation (Burkhalter, Gastil & Kelshaw, 2002; Fishkin, 2000). Not everyone agrees that deliberation alone can deliver sound policy (Dryzek, 2000; Parkinson, 2003; Sanders, 1997). Nonetheless, most admit the need for views that are the product of deliberation rather than statements.