A Case Study of Public Servants Engaged in E-Consultation in Australia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines some of the challenges faced by local government during the development and implementation of a relatively new area of e-democratic innovation in Australia: e-consultation. E-consultation is seen as a valuable way through which a two-way relationship can be developed and enhanced between citizens and elected representatives. It involves the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs), such as the Internet, to extend and/or enhance political democracy through access to information, and to facilitate participation in democratic communities, processes, and institutions. Drawing on a case study of the Darebin eForum in Victoria, Australia, this article focuses on the role of public servants as moderators of this local form of e-consultation. The discussion has three parts: online policy consultation is defined within the context of e-democracy; some of the ways that e-consultation challenges the roles of the public service, elected representatives, and citizens are outlined; and the author then argues for an e-consultation strategy that is situated within a continuum of citizen engagement that is ongoing, deliberative, educative, and inclusive.

Keywords: Darebin eForum; e-consultation; e-government; e-moderation; information and communications technology; online policy consultation; public servant

INTRODUCTION

The following discussion examines some of the challenges faced by public servants in moderating a relatively new area of e-democratic innovation in Australia: e-consultation. E-consultation is seen as a valuable channel through which a two-way relationship can be developed and enhanced between citizens and elected representatives. It involves the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs), such as the Internet, interactive broadcasting, and digital telephony, to extend
and/or enhance political democracy through access to information, and to facilitate participation in democratic communities, processes, and institutions (Balnaves, Walsh & Shoesmith, 2006; Hacker & van Dijk, 2000; Walsh, 2006).

The OECD defines consultation as:

... a two-way relationship in which citizens provide feedback to government. It is based on the prior definition of the issue on which citizens’ views are being sought and requires the provision of information. Governments define the issues for consultation, set the questions and manage the process, while citizens are invited to contribute their views and opinions. (2001, p. 23)

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

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

One type of e-consultation, online consultation, uses the Internet to enable citizens to provide feedback to government based on information and issues defined and facilitated by government (OECD, 2003). Distinguished from the “push-down” delivery of government information and services, online consultation uses the Internet to enable interactive communication (Hacker & van Dijk, 2000, p. 40). This dialogue can take place vertically between elected representatives, public servants, and the public or horizontally between members of the public and/or civil society representatives and stakeholders. Activities can range from informal engagements, such as non-binding discussions facilitated online and “electronic suggestion boxes,” to more structured and formal activities, such as online collaboration and report development, electronic voting, polling or plebiscites, structured discussion forums, audio/video conferencing, and planning simulations and games (Chen et al., 2006, p. 101).

Drawing from a case study of the Darebin eForum in Victoria, Australia, this article will focus on how e-consultation has been adopted and adapted at the level of local government in Australia. The Darebin eForum is still in a comparatively early phase of operation and thus provides some interesting insights into the development and implementation of online consultation. Focussing on the role of the public service as moderators of a local Australian government online forum, the following examination of online policy consultation is divided into three parts: online policy consultation within the context of e-democracy; some of the ways in
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