

E-Citizenship

Comment on

“Connecting Parliament to the Public Via the Internet: Two Case Studies of Online Consultation”

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Brief description of the study

Stephen Coleman, in his study *Connecting Parliament to the Public Via the Internet: Two Case Studies of Online Consultation*, is examining two different types of interactions carried out through the Internet. The first one regards domestic violence (referred to as *Womanspeak's Consultation*) and the second one was a consultation on the draft of Communications Bill (referred to as *Communications Bill's Consultation*). Aim of researching the two consultations was to answer to the following questions; namely if:

1. Online consultations provide a space for inclusive public deliberation.
2. Online consultations generate and connect networks of interest or practice.
3. Online interaction between representatives and represented leads to greater trust between them.
4. Most online discussion is uninformed and of poor quality.

As he claims, detailing the methodology:

The two consultations examined here contrasted in their purposes: the first was designed to enable women survivors of domestic violence to submit experiential testimony to a group of parliamentarians interested in developing policy; the second allowed the public to submit and discuss evidence for consideration by a committee of MPs and peers as part of the process of pre-legislative scrutiny.

Demographic profiles of participants in both consultations were produced by examining user registration forms. All messages in both consultations were analysed by a team of trained coders, using a frame designed to plot variables related to the four research hypotheses. A post-

consultation survey was sent to participants in both consultations and face-to-face interviews were conducted with participating MPs and peers.

In the first one the focus was in sharing experiences, discussion and mutual support, in the second it was more on influencing policy.

Comments

Limits of the Study

My first impression about the above rough-sketched study is that, as recognized even from the author in the conclusion, not all the consultations are alike. It's weird that he's admitting that almost at the end of his paper, because the outcome of the two researches was almost fully foreseeable before even starting, for someone that has a bit of experience with discussion boards or web dynamics in general. When Coleman is saying:

[...] whereas in the Womenspeak consultation, the overwhelming majority of messages were responses to earlier messages, in the Communications Bill consultation there was little interaction between participants.

he's just pointing out the obvious. The purposes and environments of the two consultations were so different that I wouldn't have expected anything different. Specially in the first case, the *Womanspeak's Consultation*, it's absolutely clear that if you "force" the target to discuss and share experiences, you are very likely to get, exactly, experiences sharing and replies to the messages in the board. Different could have been the result of the *Communications Bill's Consultation*, but given the fact that it was targeted to citizens that were supposed to propose lines for legislative means, the outcome (scarce interaction between members) is not that surprising. Certainly it would have been more astounding if it would have turned out into a mayhem. In a way I think that, for the second case, the way the consultation was carried out in itself was:

- setting defined border to the discussion (as the evidences collected pointed out, just 7% of them made suggestions based on personal issues);
- giving the participants a more concrete feeling of being listened by MP's. The *Womanspeak's* experience, being based mostly on personal events, was by itself unlikely to create empathy between women that suffer from domestic violence and MP's that probably never experienced violence on their own skin;

Also, some studies quoted are a bit lame. Hill and Huges, working on political chat rooms, concluded:

Chat rooms are a difficult format for thoughtful discussion. The short line space and the fast pace require people to make snap comments, not thoughtful ones.

Davis, instead, claims:

In Usenet political discussions, people talk past one another, when they are not verbally attacking each other. The emphasis is not problem solving, but discussion dominance.

I suppose these people were so naive to start studies about that just because the potential - and the implicit limits - of Internet as a communication tool were still a bit unclear at the time they went through their research (1998-1999). Seeing claims like those nowadays is just odd, since it's self-evident after just a few minutes you logged into a chat that that is not the proper place to develop a serious discussion about politics - and almost about anything else, I would add - specially if the number of participants exceed 5 or 6 people.

Relevant points

The study contains several interesting statements that I would like to comment. First of all, it's interesting when women participating at the *Womanspeak's Consultation* felt that whole experience was "empowering" them, regardless of the fact that they considered the MP's contribution insufficient. This seems to indicate that even the only fact to give these people the possibility to talk to each other (hence, improve accessibility, since most of them didn't use Internet before) it's a great step towards deliberative democracy. In my presentation about the model of future E-citizenship, I was considering the need of teaching how to use the net as a primal need for this very same reason. To put it in another way, there is no freedom without knowledge, and before giving people the tools to empower themselves, we should be sure that they know how to get the best out of them. Somehow, you start to catch a sight of your rights only when you understand the potential of the tools you can use. This excitement for the "new gained freedom" is underlined even by the declaration of one of the woman, that stated:

I have been surfing since my last post and have found a free message board. If it's suitable I will begin setting it up straight away. It runs on the same principle as this with registered

passwords and we may be able to use the same ones we have now. I am really excited at the possibility that we could have the new one ready to go to when this one closes. I don't want us to lose any time to support each other and I am sure everyone feels the same as I do.

A second interesting point is claimed in the interview of Richard Allan, MP:

If we do not sit down and look at how do we prioritise our time - does it need to change, should it be different in 2002, from how it was in 1952 – then I am not sure we will take full advantage of opportunities like this.

Most of the MP's considered both experiences useful and interesting, but they were simply unable to participate due overwhelming schedules and - I strongly suspect - even for the lack of concrete familiarity with the medium, which is sometime translated into a lower consideration of the potential of Internet compared to classical media like tv, radio and newspapers. In my opinion this "black hole" in the political system should be capitalized by new generations in two ways:

- Getting rid of coffin-dodgers, in their place since the beginning of time, specially if they refuse - causing indirect damage to all the citizens - to stay up to date with the ways democracy is changing. There is no reason why normal workers have to attend refresher courses to keep doing a good job and politicians don't.
- Clever politicians should learn how to exploit the Internet and the way it's shaping the world of communication for something different than mere propaganda, aiming instead at creating networks of citizens interested in the same issues, whose suggestions and solutions can in the end sharpen their political programs. This can be surely done, and the activity of blogs like the one of Beppe Grillo (that I discussed during the course) is there to show how can you actually set a political agenda starting from the citizens' input.

Another interesting point is the way Coleman is answering to the critique that:

...empirically, citizens' behaviour in online discussions is rarely characterised by the lofty ideals of deliberative democracy, and theoretically, that most policy issues are too complex and time-

consuming for the public to give them serious consideration, especially given the potentially overwhelming scale of mass public debate.

This critique is understandable and legitimate, but along with a dramatic redesign of GUIs (Graphic User Interface) to facilitate accessibility, readability and relevancy, I agree that:

In accordance with the norms of representative governance, citizens seem to be content to inform policy and law-makers rather than make policy and law themselves; but they do expect their representatives to be responsive to their input.

Which is even the reason why in my slide presentation I was suggesting that citizens should not make laws directly (few of them can understand the complexity of certain issues) but rather discuss about them, highlight central facts that can be under-considered by legislators, and let specialists to take care of the final form of the law.

To conclude, I found rather not-far-seeing the pronouncement of Julia Drown, MP:

With the internet format, people are used to immediate responses, but it does take time to change legislation. In that sense it isn't an equal participation; a lot of women had this as their number one priority, whereas MPs work on a huge amount of other issues. And with the time you have it is not realistic to expect MPs to read all the contributions.

If the problem is the amount of time available, or the scarcity of resources to allocate for this kind of interaction, why do not start a serious discussion about the fact that maybe it's time to start rethinking politics in a different way? Coleman is suggesting, for example, that the experience of *Womanspeak* has been for much of the women involved much more helpful than the traditional campaigns against domestic violence. Is then so hard to start questioning the way money are spent - in the traditional way - and realize that things changed in a way that we can make communication between people and governments so much more efficient?