Chapter VI. Issues for online dialogue

This chapter extends our discussion on the value of participation, addressing some practical issues reflected in the CAMP dialogue. Two related topics are considered: first, dilemmas associated with all public involvement, their relationship to online dialogue, and the degree to which online dialogue offers solutions; and second, organizational questions for online dialogue.

Dilemmas of public involvement

Public involvement is arguably quite desirable; however, it is not as simple as it may appear. The associated dilemmas go to the heart of participation and representation in a diverse society.

Do people want to be engaged?

Engaging the public in political activity appears to be increasingly difficult: though involvement may be valuable, "the public" may not be interested. This is apparent even with respect to the low level of participation involved in voting.[52] Beyond this, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, for example, suggest that people would prefer a sort of "stealth democracy" in which procedures are not "particularly visible"; many of their respondents "do not find politics intrinsically interesting. They express no desire to re-engage with the political process. They do not follow most political issues because they do not care about most issues."[53] This suggests that a desire for public involvement may be incompatible with the present public mood.[54]

Data from CAMP dialogue participants and the similarly enthusiastic groups in earlier online dialogues[55] emphatically present another point of view. CAMP dialogue participants were largely self selected – that is, they read or heard an invitation to participate and decided to accept.[56] Their willingness to invest time in a discussion is probably related to the importance they attach to education, the potential for a connection with policy makers being an added plus. Yet their responses demonstrate that previously many had not been very active politically.

We would argue that the perhaps less mediagenic finding of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse that people want input mechanisms to be available when they see an issue as important is what is applicable here. When no direct relevance is apparent, opportunities for political participation are easily set aside. There are many competing demands, and no matter what venue is used many people, especially those for whom daily living is a struggle, will have great difficulty finding time or energy to take part. Online dialogue can bring together those who *are* interested, even though their numbers may be small in one geographic location, and can provide information to demonstrate relevance to others.

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[52] See footnote 18.
[53] Hibbing, J.R. and Theiss-Morse, E.A. (2001). "Americans' desire for stealth democracy: How declining trust boosts political participation." Paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association (http://csab.wustl.edu/workingpapers/Theiss-Morse.PDF).
[54] Mueller argues that this is nothing new: see Mueller, J. (1999). "Democracy: Optimal Illusions and Grim Realities" (http://www.democ.uci.edu/democ/papers/mueller.htm).
[55] See for example Beierle and Cayford (2002), op. cit.; the dialogue archive is online at http://www.network-democracy.org/camp/
[56] In contrast, the Hibbing and Theiss-Morse data is based on 1266 respondents to a Gallup survey (a random-digit-dialing sample) and paid participants in eight focus groups, each made up of six to twelve people.

Another aspect of online participation is the possibility it provides for "observers." At first glance it might seem that ideally everyone should take part in exchanging messages – but why? Observers (the "non-posters" in the CAMP dialogue) can, without travel time or paying for hotels or restaurants, make use of the same resources – from background material to linked messages – as other participants. For some, being an observer may also be a first step toward taking part in other ways. In any case this demonstration of interest should be seen as a form of participation, especially when it takes place over a period of time and involves repeated visits to a project Web site. Observers can get a "taste" of an issue without making a major commitment, and use the Briefing Book to explore it in more detail as their interest deepens.

Who is or is not involved?

Decision quality is closely related to the adequacy of the information available to decision makers, and the extent to which it is used. When those who will be affected by a decision are included in the discussion, new perspectives and information are likely to become available – for example, on the problem definition, public values regarding alternatives, or the likely consequences of proposed policies. Instead, however, the public's role in the evolution of policy is typically limited, particularly for underserved groups. The lay public who choose to take part are often few in number, and their role is generally limited to appearances at public hearings and/or meetings with legislative staff. Hearings are announced with a public notice, but typically there is no systematic attempt to seek out and engage either the most relevant stakeholders or a representative cross-section of the public. As illustrated by lobbying campaigns everywhere, exactly who attends a hearing, testifies or writes to legislators also depends on which interest groups – whether trade associations, advocates for educational reform or others – have targeted the issue. Thus the number of participants may increase without increasing the breadth of representation. On the other hand, it is far better to have interest groups represented up front than to attempt to shut them out.

When a variety of stakeholders are involved, both the public and the decision makers can hear and compare multiple viewpoints on decision alternatives and consequences. The CAMP dialogue data suggests that when diverse participants can interact in a non-adversarial setting, they can learn from each other, and that a carefully implemented process can increase interest in politics and government. Also, some of the pressure may be taken off government officials; instead of the traditional relationship in which they receive input and take the responsibility for aggregating (or selecting) opinions, participants with differing opinions can interact and may discover mutual values or other points of agreement.[57] For decision makers, even without a representative sample, the increased involvement of "real people" may have an additional effect. In California and nationally, we have heard interest in encouraging the development of what some have called a "public voice" as a means of increasing the political will to construct policies that would otherwise be politically infeasible.

In defining participants for policy discussions, it is essential to include the question of which legislators, governmental officials and staff should be encouraged to take part, since this often determines whether the process will have the potential to lead to change. Especially when the implementation of a decision will require cross-departmental or cross-agency commitment, not only the decision makers but also those who will be responsible for implementation should be included, perhaps as participants. Consideration should be given to building commitment both within and between agencies or departments. For example, supplying information about a coming discussion and encouraging questions should begin prior to the event and continue

[57] Fishkin, J. "Democracy in Texas: The frontier spirit." *The Economist,* 347, p. 31. May 16th 1998.

through the period of analyzing public comments. Another sort of governmental involvement is needed when discussion centers on policies that affect state or local governments; in this case many governmental players will be among the stakeholders who should be involved.

As noted in Chapter III, Information Renaissance makes the assumption that a successful dialogue requires the identification and involvement of key stakeholder groups, as well as other interested members of the public. Dialogue sponsors need to think whether their usual discussion partners are the right ones for each specific topic. Again, though, "involvement" is often difficult to obtain. Potential participants need to hear about the discussion, understand its relevance to their lives, and be able to make use of the venue provided. As discussed in *New voices* (p. 46), for a successful dialogue stakeholders need to be taken into account in planning the outreach, timing and presentation of materials.

Additional steps to encourage involvement could be taken, such as "active notification" – requesting the public to sign up to receive e-mail notices when their topics of interest are under discussion, and background materials could be built into a resource for the wider community outside the dialogue. However, the issue of who takes part in a dialogue will remain a concern. This is pointed up by the demographic composition of the CAMP dialogue (in which both Info Ren and the Joint Committee had hoped to have many more students and parents, as well as more ethnic and economic diversity): just as for in-person political participation, self-selection in online dialogue means there is no assurance that relevant stakeholders will be represented. The generality of this problem is pointed up by Beierle and Cayford's finding that in nearly 60% of 63 case studies of face-to-face participation, "participants were not at all representative of the wider public."[58]

For those who are interested and have access, an online activity can encourage involvement in ways that will never be possible in one-time face-to-face events. An online event, open day and night over several days or weeks, has a clear edge in terms of accessibility in time and location. For those who live outside a city, the disabled, students, parents with young children or other caregivers, the flexibility of an online event can make the difference between participation and non-participation. Selection effects – the question of who wants to be or can be involved in this way – are somewhat different online: those for whom Internet access is difficult or impossible, or technophobes, will be more disadvantaged; those who benefit from flexibility in time or place of participation will be relatively advantaged. We believe that online discussion has the potential to bring in diverse participants, and that increases in Internet access over time will broaden this group still further. Online dialogue can also encourage participation by allowing interactions that feel quite direct, by helping participants to become better informed, by facilitating a new kind of interchange on complex issues, by encouraging collaboration, and perhaps by increasing trust and commitment. Other advantages of online dialogue using the Info Ren model, particularly when there are diverse groups of participants, are suggested by Sunstein's tests[59] for a "well-functioning system of self expression": providing encounters with views and topics one has not specifically selected, and at the same time giving a group of people a common experience that

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[58] Beierle and Cayford (2002), op. cit., p. 24.

[59] Sunstein, C. (2001). "The daily me," Chapter 1 in *Republic.com*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey (http://pup.princeton.edu/chapters/s7014.html). These tests have been better accepted than Sunstein's widely disputed concerns about the Internet; see e.g. James Fallows, "He's Got Mail." (March 14, 2002) New York Review of Books, v. 49, no. 4 (http://www.nybooks.com/articles/15180); and the Boston Review forum "Is the Internet Good for Democracy?" (http://bostonreview.mit.edu/ndf.html#Internet). Uslaner, E. (No date; post-2000) in "Trust, Civic Engagement, and the Internet" agrees with concerns re filtering but gives interesting comments on "Good Net" versus "Bad Net" theories (www.pewtrusts.com/pdf/vf_pew_internet_trustpaper.pdf).

they value. We see dialogues like the CAMP event, with participants in one large group and using mechanisms such as those described under *Civility* (p. 78), as working against any tendency to filter online contacts so as to avoid association with people who have beliefs that differ from one's own.

What can be done when important groups of stakeholders don't sign up to take part? Info Ren has attempted to work toward a solution by using the information collected at registration to get an idea of who is missing, so that outreach to underrepresented stakeholders can be intensified. In the case of geographical representation, this is relatively straightforward. When seeking target groups who do not often participate in any political process, this outreach will be much more difficult, though adequate financial resources could allow innovative attempts. This might include the development of targeted explanations of why the discussion will be relevant to them, with a careful balance between attempting to convince and overselling what a discussion can achieve. Otherwise, one can work to involve intermediaries who are in touch with the target groups and who can either urge participation or take part themselves: at the least, they can ask questions that might be raised by those who are missing. A skilled and knowledgeable moderator could also do this. More active measures are also possible, depending on the objectives of the discussion: having some participants role-play the missing groups or, given good demographic statistics and a very large group, asking survey questions and using weighted statistics when interpreting the results.

Nature and complexity of issues

The complexity and interrelatedness of many policy issues increase the need for public understanding and discussion, but also increase the difficulty of involving and informing the general public. Better-informed participants are more likely to enjoy interactions, to get something out of a discussion, and to have an impact on policy. Learning about the topic is also likely to increase a person's interest – what it means on a personal level, what it connects to – and to enhance their ability to take action or make a long-term commitment. However, participants who are new to a policy discussion may not be willing or able, or may not have time, to absorb a great deal of information before entering a discussion. Given this disjuncture, establishing a real dialogue among a diverse group of participants on a complex policy question will be a challenge. Ways must be found to formulate the discussion and provide background information such that complexity does not create an impenetrable barrier to participation.

The CAMP dialogue presented additional difficulties:

- *Strategy vs. local issues.* Many people are concerned about local schools and immediate educational outcomes, but the Plan is a rather intangible, long-term, state-level strategy and planning document. Since implementing legislation will be necessary to carry out some of its elements, no one could answer questions like "exactly what will it do?" or "how much will it cost?"
- *"Messy" issues.* Many educational issues are not just complex but "messy"[60] in one or more ways: variables are interconnected, causal relationships between interventions and

[60] "Managers are not confronted with problems that are independent of each other, but with dynamic situations that consist of complex systems of changing problems that interact with each other. I call such situations messes." Ackoff, R.L. (1979). "The future of operations research is past." *Journal of the Operations Research Society,* 30(2), p. 93. One approach to such a situation is outlined by R. E. Horn in "Knowledge Mapping for Complex Social Messes" (2001; http://www.stanford.edu/~rhorn/SpchPackard.html).

outcomes are ambiguous, and many past efforts have not produced the desired effects. Further, there may be tension between individual and societal goals, personal priorities may conflict, and funding programs are generally not coordinated.

- *Different levels of public knowledge and involvement.* The seven Working Groups spent many months digesting information in specific subject areas. They worked hard to reach agreement within groups, and to incorporate best practices and research in their recommendations. Many of these were included in a forward-thinking draft Plan – 73 pages long in the official PDF version – that suggested many changes (Box 2, p. 21). Other members of the public who had gone through a similar process might have come to the same conclusions; for those who had not, the need for change was not always apparent.

Choosing themes and topics. Any many-faceted policy document presents hard choices in selecting discussion material. For the CAMP dialogue, the 53 recommendations (and many sub-recommendations) of the draft Master Plan suggested an enormous number of potential themes and topics. Even in two weeks of discussion, only a small fraction of this material could be covered. The draft Plan was the intended focus of the dialogue, but the Working Group reports were available considerably earlier. They were summed up and publicized by interested organizations, and, because publicity for the dialogue had to be sent out before the draft Plan was available, the dialogue was organized (with the agreement of Joint Committee staff) around the Working Group themes. After the dialogue, some staff felt this had pushed the focus toward the Working Group recommendations. It might have been possible to compensate during the discussion by asking questions about specifics, but this would have required more resources, including staff time from both Info Ren and the Joint Committee.

To arrive at questions for the dialogue, Info Ren requested suggestions from Joint Committee staff and panelists, worked with staff to make a selection and arrive at final wording, but took the responsibility for the selection. The choice between raising barriers to public involvement and having a more detailed discussion seemed very clear. Compromises were reached in which questions were often stated in a general way, followed by the more specific recommendation and links to background material. However, after the dialogue some Committee staff were still disappointed about the lack of specific discussions. Here too more resources and support might have been used to achieve this aim, but this brings up a professional issue for moderators. Many feel that it should not be necessary for moderators or facilitators to have a deep understanding of the subject area under discussion. Dialogue on complex issues challenges this view: to follow a discussion and encourage thinking through multiple aspects of issues or to rapidly pick out points where a question would be effective may require considerable knowledge.

One alternative is for the sponsor to assign staff to work full-time on the dialogue while it is open for comments. This points up the need for sponsors to understand in advance the trade-offs between broad involvement and more detailed discussions, and for organizers to be able to explain what would be required to inform the public sufficiently to have a meaningful dialogue on issues that require some depth of understanding.

Background materials. Background materials are an essential part of public involvement with policy: the more complex the topic (or the more unskilled the participants), the greater the need for careful attention to this area. An online event has potential advantages over other venues with respect to educating and informing the public. Ideally, a variety of information can be made available, tailored to varied participants, and new techniques – for example, development of interactive presentations – can be explored. This is especially important for complex, intertwined issues. Rather than giving each participant an enormous stack of printed documents, an overview can be presented, with links to progressive levels of detail that can be called up as

desired. Discussion questions can be linked to specific background material, and a working glossary can be made available. Nevertheless, it is not easy to assure that participants will make use of these materials. Moderators can encourage this, and links and pop-ups can be used to remind people of what is available.

In preparing for the CAMP dialogue a good deal of time was devoted to the Briefing Book. Developing this material was both easier and more difficult because of the amount of information on education that is available on the Internet. There were no resources to allow experimentation with presentation, simplified language summaries or Spanish translations. However, Briefing Book material was organized into pages on "crosscutting issues:" 13 topics such as accountability, "alignment," assessment and equity[61] that occurred throughout the draft Plan or were related to topics on the discussion agenda. Each of these pages began with a short, non-technical summary – for example, explaining the use of the word "alignment" in the Plan, or assessment as an issue – and included many links to online resources. Searchable versions of the draft Master Plan and Working Group reports were created and put into the Briefing Book, as were many links to the draft Plan and other background materials.

Explaining content and relevance. During the CAMP dialogue the draft Plan's treatment of some areas, particularly adult education and vocational education, raised great concern among participants. To some extent this was based on misunderstanding of the draft Plan, probably exacerbated by uncertainty about the effects of its recommendations and a degree of distrust in government intervention. The message archive shows that the Joint Committee, staff and panelists worked diligently to supply information, but this was only partially successful. In retrospect, a plan for dealing with such situations, perhaps stepping back to a discussion of common goals or calling for a discussion of pros and cons, might have been helpful.

One approach to managing controversial issues would be to identify such topics before a dialogue is undertaken and pay attention, as one Joint Committee staffer put it, to "explaining why things are important." Vocational education is one example. The draft Plan put the emphasis on career education, with the intent that students should be encouraged to keep their options for further education open. However, some interpreted the lack of attention to vocational education as elitist, and offering little to those who do not go on to college. Other topics, including mandatory kindergarten as one response to the need to help large numbers of children learn English before first grade, assessment as a means of measuring outcomes and promoting accountability, or consolidation of small school districts, encountered similar difficulties.

The need for more explanation of the Plan's treatment of such topics was realized only as the dialogue progressed. Staff familiarity with the Working Groups that preceded the CAMP dialogue may have made it more difficult to see this need. As outlined above, these groups involved a large number of citizens in a very intensive process, in which many participants were – or became – quite well informed. As often occurs in participatory processes,[62] less attention was given to informing the larger community. Unfortunately, sponsors may feel they have worked intensively with the community, without realizing that this same process can increase the need to explain decisions and recommendations to the general public. The deliberations of the Working Groups supported far-reaching change, which was incorporated in the draft Plan. For some of those who had not experienced the year of reading and discussion on the issues, it

[61] Other issues were data, ESEA, finance, governance, professional personnel, quality education, school readiness, standards and technology. Links to each issue page are given in the dialogue archive at http://www.network-democracy.org/camp/bb/bb.shtml (see "Crosscutting Issues").
[62] Beierle and Cayford (2002), op. cit., e.g. p. 32 and p. 48.

was difficult to comprehend the rationale for certain recommendations in the draft Plan. (The Joint Committee responded to this in the final Plan, where some of the changes identified by Committee staff as due to the dialogue were "additional supportive text and research background to support more controversial or challenging recommendations.")

When the need is recognized and the resources are available, online dialogue presents opportunities to use a variety of techniques to explain and clarify complex or controversial topics. However, making use of these opportunities takes time and skill. One of the issues involved is "telling vs. selling."

Telling vs. selling. "Explaining" has its pitfalls. As illustrated by comments quoted under *Engagement and potential impact* (p. 59), participants may be quick to feel that an outcome has been pre-determined, and that a concept is being "sold" instead of offered for discussion. This may or may not be true: one result of distant, complex and ambiguous issues is to lower public confidence in government, including its ability to determine and implement a reasonable course of action. Messy issues make it harder to dispute this lack of confidence: for example, a failure to improve education due to the lack of alignment in the system, weak connections between programs and outcomes, and other such problems is difficult to distinguish from failure due to a lack of political will.

Sponsors should therefore think carefully about what they want from the process, what is or is not open to discussion, and state this honestly to participants. If the sponsor is open to a full-blown exchange of ideas – which may be more likely if public involvement takes place early in a policy process, before a proposal is on the table – a more free-wheeling discussion may be possible. When a proposal that the sponsor supports has already been made, it is far better to state this up front. Openness makes it easier to treat a participant comment that "they've already made up their minds" as an opportunity to deepen the discussion. For example, a panelist or staff member can be invited to present the reasons for their position, and participants can be requested to discuss these reasons and present counterarguments or alternatives.

Impact on policy and engagement

The outcome of a dialogue can be seen in terms of at least two types of impact, both important in terms of social goals for public involvement. One perspective asks if public involvement has made a difference in the resulting legislation or other decision-making. Another relates to participants: has the activity changed their outlook, for example their interest in government, their views on specific topics or their understanding of the views of other stakeholders? Success here suggests the creation of an active, engaged citizenry that pays attention to its government, and is willing to be involved in a positive way. These two types of impact, however, intertwine in a dilemma. The public's interest in policymaking is increased by expectations that their input will be used, but if expectations are disappointed attitudes may become more negative. However, honestly and directness in stating how much room there is for change and who will make the decisions provides a basis for dealing with these questions as they arise in a discussion.

As for many decisions, direct impact on policymaking is difficult to evaluate (and stakeholders may differ on whether a given impact is positive or negative.[63]) For the Master Plan, it is clear that public comments had an effect; staff can point to changes in the draft Plan that emerged as a result. However, the dialogue was only part of an extensive process, and long-term results will become clear only as the Plan is enacted, through legislation and local efforts. For citizen

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[63] Ashford, N.A. (1999). *Public Participation in Contaminated Communities.* MIT Technology and Law Program (http://web.mit.edu/ctpid/www/tl/TL-pub-PPCC.html). Chapter III, "Prior Scholarly Work on Public Participation," p. 6.

engagement, data on impact has been discussed under *New Voices* (p. 46) and *Engagement and potential impact* (p. 59): for example, participants saw the dialogue as having changed their outlook and interest in government. A message archive statement from a Joint Committee staffer directly involved with the Plan suggests that change was mutual: "Your comments have challenged some of my own thinking…."

Public involvement in policymaking can only have an impact on a decision if a de facto decision has not yet been made, if decision makers listen, and if they take public comments into account. This seems self evident, but ambiguities in these areas are a source of unhappiness in many participatory processes, as seen in participant comments under *Engagement and potential impact*. What may be less evident is the potential benefit to policy makers of public participation in policymaking. Here too utility flows, in principle, from the social goals of Chapter II. In practice, "messy" processes – together with public distrust – increase the need of decision makers for the understanding and support of the public. In an era when attention often seems most focused on government when things go wrong, enlisting the public in working through issues become more attractive. For education, Public Agenda has said "Advocates believe that if the public has its say over what schools should look like, people will once again recognize them as the public's schools, as something worth supporting."[64]

On the other hand, to public officials participatory processes often seem chaotic and unpredictable; they may be seen as taking too much time, or as adding little; or decision makers may feel that it is not "safe" to open up policymaking, apart from giving information and asking for public input. Even with a degree of openness, there may be accusations that policy makers have already made up their minds and are not really listening; or that the right stakeholders have not been involved. In particular, when the public is already somewhat distrustful, asking for "input," particularly when there is no real intent to take that input into account (for example, when what is really wanted is a ratification of a decision), may be less "safe" than attempting to create a feeling of working together to find mutually acceptable solutions, either through a deliberative process or through collaboration.

Engaging in open discussion, deliberation or collaboration with the public will call for new skills on the part of officials, and for many members of the public as well. Online dialogue has the advantage that interchanges take place a bit more slowly than in face-to-face encounters; people have time to think before they speak, and various mechanisms can be used to encourage civility (see *Civility*, p. 78). Background materials also facilitate informed discussion, as outlined earlier. Presentation of these materials and planning to make good use of online comments may need to be learned, but online dialogue can serve as an intermediate step that increases skills and trust and opens paths toward real collaboration. Even without collaboration, the impact of public involvement will be significantly increased if it occurs earlier in the policy development process; this is an interesting goal for online dialogue.

Trust

Trust in government has been decreasing,[65] and we have suggested that lack of trust is one reason for difficulties in public-government interactions. Short of major reforms and better understandings of causal relationships between policy and outcomes, public participation in the policy process may be one of the few avenues to a "virtuous cycle" in which improving interaction and trust between government and public could lead to more participation and perhaps yet greater trust. Here too, the dilemma is that participation may also have the opposite

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[64] Farkas et al. (2001), op. cit.
[65] See footnote 16.

effect – when increased interest in government raises expectations that are subsequently disappointed, trust may decrease. As for all participatory processes, it is essential to spell out carefully the degree of influence that participants can expect, but the problem can easily persist.

Again, participant comments under *Engagement and potential impact* (p. 59) underline the need to deal with this issue: quite a few felt that the outcome of the dialogue was pre-determined, or that the institutions involved are captives of special interest groups, or simply wondered if the dialogue would make a difference. Others were quite specific that if the public comments had no effect, they would be disillusioned. In addition, distrust was evident in remarks about the timing of the dialogue and the possibility that this might have been an attempt to limit participation:

- I am a teacher. The last 2 weeks of classes are the worst possible time for a dialogue on education if you really want teachers to participate. The scheduling was either quite insensitive or deliberate. After many years, I am almost cynical enough to believe it was the latter. I really pushed to find the time to participate. The issues are vital.

When a "messy" situation decreases trust, it becomes very difficult to discuss education and many other current issues. There is rarely time to develop a common background of information, and it is easy to assume that missteps are a result of "politics," whether or not this is true. In such a situation, it is especially important for the "public" and the "government" to begin to see each other as individuals, and to perceive that it might be possible to work together toward solutions. In this respect online dialogue offers a great deal of promise. The discussion (and, ideally, the process as a whole) is transparent: participants see not only their own messages, but also those of others, and information can easily be made available. The interchanges often feel direct and personal, and the resulting feelings of community may act on officials as well as the public, providing an impetus for listening and change on both sides. Some of the open-ended questions give examples of "thinking of each other as people:"

- I got a sense that they care and that they want to make a reasonable change. There was evidence that the people involved care a great deal and are sometimes at a loss where to start.
- …how do we help policy makers hear our concerns?

If a participatory process is perceived as transparent and fair – and for a political process, this includes the idea that it is non-partisan, that viewpoints are represented in a balanced way – participants will be more likely to accept the results,[66] and trust may increase. As online policy discussion becomes more common, potential participants will become more selective in deciding whether to take part, based on non-partisanship as well as other concerns:

- Will the sponsoring agency listen?
- Will it be worth my time? Will my comments make a difference?
- Is the process an opportunity for discussion or an attempt to convince – to sell me a particular viewpoint or political stance?
- Does the background information give a balanced, non-partisan overview of the issues involved? Is it authoritative and complete? Who has provided it?

[66] The general important of perceiving a process as fair and building trust is covered in Kim, W.C. and Mauborgne, R.A. (1997). "Fair Process: Managing in the Knowledge Economy." *Harvard Business Review* (July/August). A discussion of this article by Victor Rozek, including the question of how long trust will last if it is not accompanied by fair outcomes, is also available online (http://www.midrangeserver.com/mid/mid021903-story05.html).

- Who decided which people would be on the panels – and why? Do the agency representatives and "experts" in the discussion represent a spectrum of viewpoints?
- Will the atmosphere be one I will enjoy? (See *The dialogue as a public space…,* p. 51.)
- Will the topics and questions lead to good discussion? Do they cover my concerns? Can participants influence the course of the discussion?
- Who will make the decisions, and how?

Questions like these need to be considered by sponsors and organizers of dialogues when designing an online event. Each of the elements of a dialogue has a contribution to make. As outlined in the following section, central organizational principles should include clear objectives; broad, inclusive outreach; appropriate background materials; relevant, articulate panelists; and, importantly, a commitment by the sponsoring agency to interact with and respond to participants.

Following these principles and other suggestions in this report can increase the potential for enhancing trust, but one event cannot be expected to effect lasting change. Problems with trust emerge from the society as a whole, and will be very difficult to solve; in Beierle and Cayford's cases, the social goal of building trust had the least success.[67] This emphasizes the great importance of attention to this area; real improvements in trust will require sustained efforts at communication and discussion. As discussed in Chapter VII (*Institutionalization,* p. 85), developing best practices and ethical standards for public participation need to be developed to support these efforts.[68] Again, skilled online moderators and staff can make a major contribution. Coleman and Gøtze give an online slant on principles for facilitators that encourage trust, a variety of facilitator roles and basic listening skills for public officials.[69]

Organizational questions

Roles of sponsors, organizers and others

Info Ren-produced online dialogues have benefited from relationships with a number of non-profit organizations, foundations and government agencies. Our experience with the CAMP dialogue has helped us to sharpen our definitions of these relationships and has made us realize that organizing successful public involvement activities requires a clear delineation of the roles of the various participants.

Sponsoring agency. For a dialogue in a political context, the sponsor is the unit of government seeking information through an online dialogue. For the CAMP dialogue in effect, if not formally, the sponsoring agency was the Joint Committee to Develop a Master Plan for Education. The sponsoring agency must make a commitment of staff time for participation in the dialogue.

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[67] Beierle and Cayford (2002), op. cit., p. 33.
[68] Some steps have been taken; see OECD (2003). "Engaging Citizens Online for Better Policy-making" (http://www.oecd.org/pdf/M00039000/M00039857.pdf), particularly Boxes 1 and 3; and Steven Clift (2002). "Online Consultations and Events: Top Ten Tips" (http://www.mail-archive.com/dowire@tc.umn.edu/msg00479.html). Government guides for pubic involvement more generally are also available, e.g. for the UK (http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/regulation/Consultation/Code.htm, including an interesting checklist), Canada (http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/ocapi-bpcp/framework_guides_cover_e.html) and Australia (http://www.ccu.dpc.wa.gov.au/index.cfm?fuseaction=publications#consultres1); in the U.S., see the Environmental Protection Agency Public Involvement Policy (2003), especially "Seven basic steps for effective public involvement" (http://www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement/public/index.htm).
[69] Coleman, S. & Gøtze. J. (2001). *Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation.* Hansard Society, London, Chapter 2 (http://bowlingtogether.net/chapter2.html).

Further, if it expects serious public comments in the course of the dialogue, it should state clearly how it intends to process that input and how recommendations from the public will be considered for incorporation into its final policy. A flaw in the production of the CAMP dialogue, as discussed below, was that some of these points were ambiguous.

Organizer. This is the group that is putting together the dialogue – perhaps serving as a broker, creating the Web site, moderating the online discussion, developing summaries and maintaining the archive. The organizer may also create the Briefing Book and line up panelists or oversee the work of other groups that carry out these tasks. Info Ren handled these tasks in the CAMP dialogue, but with significant help from staff of the Joint Committee and with resource material from several non-profit organizations that work to further educational reform, particularly EdSource. In other events this work might be divided among several organizations, although there will be a need for some coordinating authority to provide coherence in presentation.

Funder. Funding, too, can involve multiple sources. Info Ren originally expected that the Joint Committee would be a major funder of the CAMP dialogue or would provide active help in fund-raising. Info Ren planned to supplement these funds with money raised from private foundations. While Info Ren was successful in covering the basic costs for the event with grants from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, IBM Corporation and Intel California, no fund-raising was forthcoming from the Joint Committee. A significant portion of the dialogue therefore had to be subsidized by the organizer. As described previously, this also entailed a cutback in the projected scope of the event and necessitated last-minute decisions, both of which reduced participation. While there is no logical need for the sponsoring agency to be one of the funders, this is a good way for the agency to demonstrate that it gives the dialogue a high priority in its efforts to solicit public involvement. It also makes it much easier to obtain supplemental funding, since the dialogue then clearly bears the imprimatur of the sponsoring agency.

Partner. This term could be applied to all of the groups that contribute to a dialogue – whether by supplying material for the Briefing Book, helping to identify and recruit panelists, or helping to advertise the dialogue and recruit participants. Ideally, the set of partners should include advocacy groups on both sides of any controversial issue. For example, in the CAMP dialogue, Info Ren approached representatives of the various state agencies that deal with education, the teachers unions, and non-profit groups interested in educational reform. The dialogue would have profited from more explicit inclusion of these groups – as panelists, for example – but many did help in outreach by letting their members or supporters know about the activity.

Defining roles and responsibilities. The development and production of an online dialogue involves an interplay among sponsors, organizers, funders and other partners. It is useful to define the roles and responsibilities of the sponsor and the organizer with respect to each of the elements of the dialogue. In addition to providing an event that encourages constructive engagement, assurances are needed for all – particularly for the public – about the commitment of the sponsor and the organizer to a fair and non-partisan process. Also, who is sponsoring the event, who is organizing it and who is funding it should be clear to participants.

The first point and last points below require the involvement of the sponsor; for other items, either the sponsor or the organizer may assume responsibility. However, due to the potential impact on public profile, the sponsor should be involved in this decision-making and understand all of the arrangements:

- *Clear objectives.* This requires the sponsoring agency to lay out a set of issues, identify stakeholders and indicate why public comments are being sought and what use will be made of the input.
- *Broad, inclusive outreach.* Both the stakeholders who have been identified and the general public need to be notified and encouraged to take part.

- *Appropriate background material.* The Briefing Book should cover the subjects under discussion in a non-partisan manner, using language that will be understandable to all participants. There should be introductory summaries for more complex materials.
- *Relevant, articulate panelists.* The panelists can set the tone of the event, so their responsiveness and clarity are important. Further, their views should cover a range of political options on the issues under discussion, lest the dialogue be viewed as slanted toward one pole.
- *Commitment to action by the sponsoring agency.* The more explicit this commitment can be, the more seriously participants will approach the event. Steps include:
    - Taking part in the discussion.
    - Responding to participants' input and questions.
    - Using public input in the decision-making process.

Agreements regarding the response to comments from the public may assume various levels of formality, ranging from a simple statement from the sponsoring government agency to a legal requirement that binds the agency to respond to public comment. For the CAMP dialogue there was a welcome message from Senator Dede Alpert, Chair of the Joint Committee, which expressed the Committee's interest and intent with respect to the dialogue. In other forums, such as the Notice and Comment process followed in federal rulemaking, this commitment may be contained in governing statutes.

The sponsor's use of comments from a dialogue is a critical issue, but a prior question is how to get a grip on the useful information contained in a large number of messages. If sponsoring agency staff are heavily involved in the online process, they will have a basic awareness of the comments received. However, during a large dialogue it is difficult to maintain an overview; a thousand or so messages can be a challenge. Many alternatives and techniques are possible to help in summing up messages: pop-up questionnaires during an event could act as indicators, specific staff could be designated to deal with each theme, and so forth. One way to facilitate exploration of a message archive can be seen in the archive of a previous dialogue (http://www.network-democracy.org/cgi-bin/epa-pip/show_tables.pl). Here agency staff went through messages to identify key topics and problems, and Info Ren set up a search engine that allows agency staff – or anyone else – to search the archive by topic and/or key words.

Project management, overseeing the process as a whole, is typically the responsibility of the organizer. Mechanisms should be in place for the organizer to respond to questions about the Web site, and to make modifications, as necessary. In the CAMP dialogue, as noted, Info Ren also took the responsibility for several other elements, including the identification and notification of stakeholders and construction of the Briefing Book. Identification of panelists, again, was a shared effort between the two organizations. The Joint Committee did a good job with respect to its own strong representation among panelists, an important feature for a discussion in a political context. Responding to questions was not done very systematically, but some Committee staffers worked very conscientiously toward this end, and this appeared to pay off in terms of public opinion. Use of the comments was less clear. Although a great deal of effort was put into collecting input in the dialogue and elsewhere, no formal process was established to make use of it.

When the organizer is under contract to the sponsoring agency, then lines of authority will be clear and roles may be better defined. Absent a contract, it is still advisable to develop a specific written agreement. Functional organizational structures gelled without such an agreement in the case of the CAMP dialogue, but only due to the dedication of individual staff members; more discussion between the sponsor and the organizer would have been helpful. It is easy to imagine a far less successful outcome, so a more robust structure would be preferable.

Suggesting discussion of these issues between the organizer and the sponsoring agency raises some interesting questions on the dynamics of this relationship. What is the responsibility of the organizer to inform a potential sponsor about participatory processes in general and their role in the dialogue in particular, including the need for commitment and for a plan to deal with the resulting input? Is this a question of educating the sponsor on new mechanisms for public involvement – or, as it is more likely to be perceived, a matter of selling one of the organizer's products? And once the agency has taken on the role of sponsor, how much of the activity should they continue to delegate to the organizer?

Although this was not an issue in the CAMP dialogue, it is easy to think of situations in which an online dialogue could become very contentious. Whose job is it to defuse an inflammatory situation? Who will decide if some messages are defamatory or otherwise unacceptable for a public discussion? If a governmental agency is in charge of the event, will their legal counsel feel that they are legally constrained from imposing any restrictions on the speech of the participants? This is only one of a flock of issues we have encountered in discussions with several federal agencies. We believe that these questions may sometimes lead governmental sponsors to prefer an arms-length relationship with the organizer, who could conduct a forum outside of standard government channels but provide input into those channels.

As online events become less unusual and more interesting for their commercial potential, the need to consider issues such as non-partisanship, how best to inform sponsors and participants, and agreements on roles and responsibilities will grow. This suggests that it is time to begin to define best practices and ethical standards for online discussions.

In Chapter VII we consider a longer-term perspective. We believe that these issues can best be met by making dialogue a standard part of legislative and regulatory processes, and that mechanisms should be put in place to allow for public dialogue on many issues before state or federal legislative bodies. This might involve a new or existing non-partisan agency of government – perhaps something like the current California office of the legislative analyst – or contractual relationships with groups outside government. This approach would solve several problems of sponsorship and production.

Civility

Participants found the CAMP dialogue an enjoyable means of civic engagement; those with diverse viewpoints interacted in a non-adversarial manner, and people felt they learned from each other. Yet online discussion is often said to involve insults and flaming.[70] We suspect that there is no discrepancy here, and that out-of-control exchanges occur most often in un-moderated online forums. The CAMP dialogue (like other Info Ren events) was moderated and extremely civil, as reflected in the participants' assessments in the section on *The dialogue as a public space…,* (p. 51).

The more contentious the topic, the more important it is to achieve a civil discussion, to increase the likelihood that participants will be able to hear each other's views. It is also important to demonstrate the value of dialogue both to the public and to legislators or government agency staff; a non-adversarial exchange is likely to be more attractive to all parties.

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[70] The Hackers Dictionary (http://www.mcs.kent.edu/docs/general/hackersdict/02Entries) defines the verb "to flame" as "to post an e-mail message intended to insult and provoke" and gives a colorful etymology. A popular review of research on flaming and related phenomena is given by Bruce Bower: (May 4, 2002). "The Social Net: Scientists hope to download some insight into online interactions" *Science News Online,* Vol. 161, No. 18 (http://www.sciencenews.org/20020504/bob9.asp).

A non-adversarial tone is not achieved simply by having a moderator who cracks down on the first note of hostility. It isn't the act of moderating a dialogue that keeps it civil; rather it's the fact that uncivil behavior could be restrained if necessary, which means it rarely or never occurs. The initial tone can be set by example, using friendly and informal words in announcements and the opening remarks from invited panelists, and maintained with occasional messages from moderators and other staff. Participants quickly pick up on this tone and help to establish the tenor of the event.

We have seen this phenomenon repeatedly in the online events we have hosted. Many participants quickly develop a strong sense of identification with the group – and this is true even when the group's "tone" is somewhat contentious. If someone attacks the process – or threatens to divert it with inappropriate behavior – members of the group will quickly put things back on track. Thus Info Ren is able to conduct moderated discussion groups in which the moderator seldom, if ever, has to intervene in the discussion. Instead, our staff and moderators mainly help participants focus on the tasks at hand. This, however, again raises the more subtle point that people may simply ignore messages that are "insufficiently civil" (footnote 49). In a threaded discussion these messages tend to get isolated in threads that other people may not read extensively. A skilled moderator may work behind the scenes to work out frustrations, or may encourage the group to consider ideas that are significant, even if stated unpleasantly.

Some of the tricks of the trade can be summarized as follows:

- Ask participants to register as real people – with their actual names and e-mail addresses (although in the interest of diverting spammers, it may be best to suppress publication of these addresses).
- Use the registration form to solicit a telephone number that project staff can use to contact a participant if a technical or process problem should arise.
- State the guidelines for the discussion clearly – no abusive language, no sales pitches, no personal attacks, etc.
- Explain that all messages will be reviewed before being posted on the site.
- Assure that staff are present during advertised hours so as to minimize the delay between the posting of a message and its appearance on the Web site.
- Provide welcoming messages – in response to registration and for visitors to the Web site – that make it clear that people with all viewpoints are invited to participate.
- Have panelists, staff and participants introduce themselves as the dialogue begins.
- Identify staff members and representatives of the sponsoring agency as individuals, preferably with pictures and biographical information.
- Ask project staff to attempt to deal with (or explain) technical glitches – even if they are clearly problems of users or someone else's software. The point is to show that staff are available to deal with whatever problems may come up and to give participants and panelists the confidence that the show will go on as scheduled, even if there are unexpected complications now and then.
- Thank panelists and participants for specific contributions and insights. This helps glue the conversation together by underscoring particular points that have been made, and makes people feel good about the process.
- Practice facilitation "out of band" – that is, behind-the-scenes. Info Ren sometimes sends out e-mail messages during a dialogue, perhaps targeting people who have made no postings. These personalized messages are likely to produce responses, which may highlight technical problems or process issues – or may confirm that many people are following the discussion as readers but don't presently want to post messages.

- Encourage follow-ups, explanations and clarifications. Unlike a town meeting, where contributors are on the spot to use their perhaps three minutes and sit down, an online dialogue has a less hurried dynamic. When staff receive an interesting personal communication from a participant, they can urge the participant to let other people hear what they have to say.
- Provide heads-ups to panelists and staff at the sponsoring agency so that participants' questions and needs will be addressed promptly.
- Assure that moderators, panelists and sponsors' staff are familiar with the Web site and the process of posting messages before the dialogue begins.
- Encourage participants to understand and make use of technical features on the Web site. Tell them where to find how-to information. Remind them how to follow a threaded discussion to help with information overload, and remind them how to find the background information for topics addressed on different days of the discussion.

Mechanics

The mechanics of a dialogue include considerations of both the underlying technology and a number of less technical user issues.

Technology. The technology that underlies an online dialogue must be designed with several audiences in mind. These include the participants, for whom ease of use is paramount; the public officials and others who want to refer to materials in the dialogue archives; the group sponsoring the dialogue; and, finally, academic researchers who might want to examine the dynamic of the dialogue, message contents or other factors.

Some of the demands of these different audiences run at cross-currents, so there is a need to set priorities and perhaps make compromises. Participants need a simple and efficient interface. Public officials need a stable platform, good internal organization and reasonably extensive search capabilities. Standards for data exchange are needed if different units of government are to be able to work together effectively. Academic researchers will be looking for interoperability with other systems that they might use for data analysis. And the group organizing the dialogue will value stability, while seeking a low-cost solution. Depending on the financial and philosophical interests of the organizer, there will be an interest in either protecting a system's proprietary design or facilitating the reproduction of the basic system architecture.

Info Ren prefers an open standards, open source approach to building software for online dialogues, for two reasons. First, there is the desire to allow broad replication of this facility at the lowest possible cost. Open source software – including a Web server (Apache), a relational database (mysql), a mailing list manager (majordomo) and a Web archiver (MhonArc) – forms the core of the Info Ren system used for the CAMP dialogue. All of this software is available at no cost via the Internet, and the core elements are fast, reliable and tested over years of use by an enormous online audience.

The second reason to prefer open standards in the specification of software for public dialogues has to do with scalability and the desire for interoperability with similar systems in use by other organizations and other units of government. The fundamental unit of all messages in our system is a standard e-mail message, supplemented with custom mail headers to identify special features such as messages from panelists or staff, the discussion topic to which a message refers, and a message identifier within the dialogue. Visitors to the Web site don't see unformatted e-mail messages; rather they view versions of the messages that have been converted to html for online display by their own browsers. Researchers, however, can retrieve the original mailbox files for each day of the dialogue and process this material as they like.

By using a standard mailbox format, Info Ren retains the facility to add an e-mail interface to its system, although this was not done in the CAMP dialogue. More importantly, since the system retains all relevant message headers, it would be possible to export messages with XML markup or, more generally, to construct a Web service interface to the system. We believe that approach will be key to the development of scalable systems for online dialogue, so that it will be possible to have online dialogues with tens or hundreds of thousands of individuals, sharing information and exchanging viewpoints in hundreds or thousands of parallel conversations. The mailbox format is not the only possible way to organize messages for this purpose: for example, a different format has long been used for the exchange of Usenet news. But systems that use proprietary message formats or that lose message headers in the process of converting materials for display on the Web are much poorer candidates for a system of scalable parallel online dialogues. And, if the pros and cons (including cost) are carefully weighed, it is such a system that governments are likely to want to develop.

User issues. User issues for an online dialogue system are less technical in nature. For the most part they relate to ease of use and the ability of computer novices to come up to speed rapidly. Responses in the evaluation forms show that the audience for the CAMP dialogue was very broad in this regard: some participants praised Info Ren's system for its simplicity and ease of use, while others found the system too complex to navigate. We interpret this range of responses as indicative of the range of Internet experience in the audience, but it is a reminder that it is important to design with the low end of the experience curve in mind. There are many possibilities for guidance for less-skilled users, including tutorials, pop-ups offering help, and a "tips" file, but how to offer enough help for the least skilled without boring others, and how to assure that these functions will be found and *used* by those who need them remain difficult issues.

As discussed in the preceding section, we find it important to have moderators but, as outlined in the section on *Civility* (p. 78), even more important to set the tone of the discussion in informal ways. Going hand in hand with a moderator is the idea of having participants register for the event and give their real identity at registration. Some organizers of public dialogues favor anonymity, but Info Ren prefers real people with real names. There are privacy issues here, most notably the practice of commercial spammers who harvest e-mail addresses from public discussion forums. This problem has gotten significantly worse in the months following the CAMP dialogue, and Info Ren will take more stringent steps to suppress the publication of e-mail addresses in its future events. Recent tests by some reporters have shown that if addresses are not masked, spammers will capture the address of someone who posts messages in a public forum within just a few hours.

While participants in the CAMP dialogue were asked to register, there was no requirement for a password to enter the site or post messages. Passwords often discourage use and create additional support problems. The registration status of someone submitting a posting could be checked by examining their e-mail, but this was not routinely done. This meant that some people did post messages without having registered – a potential problem had there been a need for the moderator to restrict postings. But there were basically no very ill-tempered messages, and only one case in which the moderator requested that a submitter reconsider the language in a message.

The CAMP dialogue was structured somewhat as a town hall meeting might be – with a panel of experts and elected representatives and a large audience able to interact with members of the panel. Obviously this is not the only possible architecture for such a forum. Other organizers prefer small group discussions, but Info Ren has found that groups of 500-1000 can function quite effectively online. Not everyone is online at the same time, yet a group of this size produces a fairly high volume of messages, which creates a significant "buzz" to be heard by

those reading the messages on a regular basis. Using one large group, everyone is able to interact with the same experts, and everyone is brought into contact with the full range of participants. Smaller groups do allow for more personal interaction, but many of the people drawn to an online forum have come to listen as much as to speak, and large groups put fewer demands on such participants. Significantly, while a high percentage of people who signed up for the dialogue said that they expected to post messages, no more than 30% of the registrants actually did post. This is not a low percentage for online gatherings, and there was no sense in the evaluation forms that people felt they hadn't been able to speak or were intimidated from doing so.

Cost versus engagement

We have argued that online participation is an interesting new mechanism for civic engagement, and suggested that it can pay off in terms of broad social goals: incorporating public values, improving decision quality, educating and informing the public, mitigating conflict, and building trust in institutions; and that this can be achieved in a non-adversarial way. But these goals can be achieved only if sufficient time and money are put into these events – or, equivalently, if structures are built to assure that this takes place. The trade-offs between cost and engagement bear not only on the effectiveness of dialogues but also on the public presence of the sponsoring organization. Online events can be put on at very little cost – by, for example, populating a Web site with the text of proposed legislation and setting up an e-mail address for public comments. But this approach may not meet anyone's definition of involvement and, if there is no explanation, response or follow-up, may actually increase public dissatisfaction with the remoteness of government.

Sponsors and stakeholder groups can assist in the processes of collecting materials for a Briefing Book, finding panelists and recruiting participants; but when the issues are contentious or where there are many interested stakeholders, there must be provisions for coordinating this activity and assuring non-partisanship, which can represent an added cost.

At every stage there are potential conflicts between cost and engagement. For example, the desire for an audience that is broader but also better informed results in a need to pay for production of simplified explanations and tools to help naïve participants deal with the topic at hand. When cost considerations become dominant, compromises are necessary and a barrier to repeated events is created, making it difficult, if not impossible, to build on previous successes.

Behind these conflicts there is a fundamental issue of scale. Computers and computer networks are well-suited to events that could scale up to involve many millions of people. Human institutions are much less facile in dealing with this type of transition. To relieve this conflict – and to minimize the problems of cost for repeated large-scale public dialogues – we believe that the appropriate solution is one of *institutionalization,* as discussed in the following chapter.