Chapter VII. Conclusions and Recommendations

The chief conclusion of the evaluation of the CAMP event is that online dialogue can be recommended as a mechanism for civic engagement. The results of the five evaluation questions, summarized below, all support the view that online events can generally offer significant advantages over public meetings with regard to the number and geographic distribution of those who can participate, and in flexibility for both the public and policy makers. When properly structured, the public space created for interaction, communication and engagement can be welcoming for participants and can encourage constructive, non-adversarial discussion.

The discussion of issues related to public participation in a political context, and to the organization and infrastructure required to put on a successful online event, suggest additional conclusions: online dialogue should be institutionalized, so that it becomes a routine part of legislative and regulatory processes; and standards should be adopted both for the exchange of data associated with dialogue; and both best practices and ethical standards are needed for participatory interchanges.

In this chapter, conclusions that flow from the preceding sections are briefly summarized, and the concept of institutionalization is presented in more detail.

Conclusions

The CAMP dialogue

Goals. Online dialogue can be carried out in ways that support broad social goals such as incorporating public values, improving decision quality, mitigating conflict and building trust in institutions.

Participant satisfaction. CAMP participants were quite enthusiastic, and would like more opportunities to interact with policy makers in this way. They find online dialogue a significant addition to existing mechanisms.

New voices. While the dialogue did not involve many of the most-hoped-for new participants, over one-third of registrants had not known about the Master Plan before learning of the dialogue; of the remainder, 45% had not known they could comment.

Online dialogue offers important advantages for those who live outside a city, the disabled, students, parents with young children or other caregivers. Technology can be a barrier, but other constraints – lack of information on issues, scarcity of time, lack of literacy, outreach and publicity – are at least as important. To appreciably increase civic engagement among underrepresented groups, it will be necessary to invest more in recruitment, use different approaches for outreach, institutionalize public involvement, find ways to demonstrate the relevance of seemingly abstract discussions, and provide easy-to-absorb summaries of background materials.

The dialogue as a "public space." Online dialogue can function quite well as a public space, particularly in comparison to venues such as public hearings. Participants felt they had enough information, and that others knew what they were talking about. They felt welcome and said people's attitudes and responses encouraged participation. The quality of communication in the

discussion was seen as high: respectful, balanced, constructive, a useful way to examine questions and ideas, and addressing participants' concerns.

What participants gained. Participants, as noted, valued the opportunity for interaction with public officials and staff and enjoyed the dialogue. Most did not expect a great deal of impact on policy, but more than half expected at least "some." Many described themselves as having learned during the dialogue, and the discussion was seen as a useful way to examine questions and ideas. A majority reported learning more about others' opinions, and most said they had thought more about their own opinions.

What policy makers gained. Online dialogue was seen as far more interactive than other venues for public input. It involves more people and makes room for some who don't often come to open meetings. The discussion is less formal and broader, more weighted toward getting the opinions of the lay public, and people's comments are more direct than in hearings. For many this was probably a first in terms of being able to interact directly with a legislator. Public involvement, done well, can benefit policy makers in terms of goodwill, increased trust, educating the public on issues and gaining information. Further, more than a third of all evaluation respondents – and 50% of those who had been less active politically – reported that the dialogue had increased their interest in government and politics.

Issues for online dialogue

Dilemmas of public involvement

Do people want to be engaged? No matter how valuable public involvement in policy discussions may be, many of "the public" may not be interested. Online dialogue can bring together those who *are* interested, even though their numbers may be small in one geographic location, and can help to demonstrate relevance to others. It also allows "observers" to get a taste of an issue without making a major commitment, and to explore it in more detail as interest deepens.

Who is or is not involved. To improve the information available to decision makers, those who will be affected by a decision should be involved in policy discussions. 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. However, online participation faces the same barriers as other forms of political involvement. To broaden representation, new approaches to outreach and to presentation of online background materials will be needed to inform the public and demonstrate the relevance of policy to people's lives. When important stakeholders are missing, extra outreach should be attempted; innovative techniques may help to fill the gap.

Nature and complexity of issues. The complexity and interrelatedness of many policy issues increases the need for public understanding and discussion, but also increases the difficulty of involving the lay public in decision-making. Interactive online presentation techniques are needed that allow the user to explore an issue step by step, in as much or as little detail as they want, and show interconnections among issues. Skills of both organizers and sponsors need to be developed to facilitate non-partisan communication, including development of themes and discussion questions, background materials, pros and cons and "why this is important" for different target groups and varied levels of reading ability.

Impact on policy and engagement. Impact on policy and impact on public engagement are both critical. These two types of impact intertwine: public interest in policymaking is increased by an expectation that input will make a difference; however, if this expectation is disappointed, attitudes may become more negative. Public officials need to understand the potential benefits of public involvement in policymaking; new skills in working in a participatory way will be needed

to build trust and learn to work together. Online dialogue, in which people have time to think before they speak, offers a promising venue.

Trust. Decreasing trust makes interactions between the public and government more difficult. Participation may be an avenue to improvement, but again, if expectations are disappointed may have the opposite effect. Online dialogue can help "public" and "government" to begin to see each other as individuals and work together toward solutions. Sponsors and organizers, however, will need to recognize participants' concerns, including explicit considerations of fairness and non-partisanship.

Organizational questions

Roles of sponsors, organizers and others. Sponsors and organizers need to discuss and agree on their roles and responsibilities; participants should know who is sponsoring the event, who is organizing it, who is funding it, and what the sponsor's commitment to action is. As online events become more numerous and more commercial, best practices and ethical standards will need to be developed.

Civility. By following best practices in the design, presentation, moderation and facilitation of an online event, organizers can maintain an open yet non-adversarial environment for public discourse.

Mechanics. The technology behind a dialogue must meet the needs of participants, public officials, and academic researchers. An open standards, open source approach to building software both allows broad replication at the lowest possible cost and provides scalability and interoperability with similar systems of other organizations or units of government. There are also less technical user issues: to assure that the public forum provided by the dialogue is accessible to all, the online facility should be designed with simplicity in mind. User support, participant passwords – which Info Ren prefers not to use – registration and group size must all be addressed.

Cost versus engagement. Online participation is an interesting new mechanism for civic engagement, but can only reach its potential when sufficient time and money can be invested. There are potential conflicts at every stage of design and production, as when the desire for a broader, better informed audience results in a need to develop simplified explanations and tools. 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.

Institutionalization

Many of the issues outlined above could be addressed by building dialogue into legislative and regulatory processes, much as public hearings are currently a part of the process. Indeed, online dialogues might replace some fraction of public hearings, although a situation in which public officials became visible only in the online realm would not be desirable.

By making dialogue the norm and establishing and maintaining the infrastructure needed to organize an online dialogue at national level, institutionalization could increase public participation, improve the effectiveness of civic discussion, facilitate production of background materials, and build the skills of sponsors, organizers and participants. It could spur the development of ethical standards and best practices, and could reduce or eliminate many of the recurring costs of production. A few examples:

- *Decisions to produce a dialogue, informing sponsors, making agreements and seeking funding.* Making dialogue the norm would lead to significant cost savings per event. The question would be which topics, rather than whether an event could be produced. Word

of mouth would encourage potential sponsors to take part, and the need for commitment by a sponsor would become known. The knowledge and skills acquired by sponsors – as well as other players – could build from one event to the next, and could be codified to aid those playing these roles for the first time. Better understanding of what types of events work best in which situations would make online dialogue an increasingly productive technique.

- *Outreach.* One-time events require a learning process in many areas, including defining stakeholders and informing them through repeated advertisements. If, however, every piece of legislation created the potential for dialogue – perhaps triggered by a critical mass of people expressing an interest in the topic – then there could be more effective, less expensive ongoing public information, with advertising costs spread over a large number of events. People could sign up for e-mail notification on favorite themes, which would increase interest. As online participation becomes a primary mechanism for interacting with government and students become familiar with the process through civics courses, there will be less need to advertise individual dialogues. More attention can then be paid to stakeholder identification and hard-to-reach target groups, and best practices can be developed.

- *Background materials.* Info Ren has created a Briefing Book for each of its online dialogues. In an environment in which dialogue was institutionalized, many materials would already be available online, techniques for selection and production could be standardized, much of the process of assembling a Briefing Book could be automated, and dialogues on related topics could share materials. This would decrease another significant cost, and could encourage the development of innovative tools for presentation. Large-scale production would also encourage the development of standards for representing the viewpoints involved in a non-partisan manner.

- *Software and technical standards.* Adopting standards for software and data exchange, building software out of components, and making use of open source software will help to make dialogue software largely reusable, so that it can be shared across government agencies and levels of government.

- *Ethical standards and best practices.* Producing a dialogue touches on many ethical issues – for example, who will be notified and how, non-partisanship in presentation of materials, rules and procedures, fairness to participants, and the sponsors' use of public comments. These can affect participants' attitudes and willingness to engage in such discussions. When the event takes place in a political context, trust in government as a whole may be at stake. Institutionalization would offer opportunities to identify and encourage adoption of practices that merit trust and work toward ethical standards for dialogue production.

In light of these issues we believe that future foundation funding should go, in part, toward establishing examples that could be used as a basis for institutionalization. The CAMP dialogue and other such events have established the validity of online dialogue and its viability as a means for public involvement. What is needed next is a recognition of the potential for institutionalization and the education of law-makers and agency personnel as to the general utility of this approach. At the same time government agencies wishing to use dialogue should be encouraged to develop their own mechanisms to fund such events. With this experience in hand, they can begin to develop mechanisms for sustainable, ongoing funding.

Recommendations

Use online dialogue as a means for civic engagement. Online dialogue should be used as broadly as public hearings to solicit public comments, educate the public about matters up for

decision and encourage discussion of issues under consideration: these events offer flexibility for both the public and policy makers, allow large numbers of people to take part no matter where they live, and allow a broader geographic spread among the public who are involved. When properly structured, a welcoming public space can be created for interaction, communication and engagement, which can encourage constructive, non-adversarial discussion.

Institutionalize the role of online dialogue in legislative and regulatory processes. To increase civic engagement, broad adoption of this new mechanism should be encouraged by incorporating online dialogue in legislative and regulatory processes. By increasing and codifying knowledge and skills, providing ongoing public information, sharing background materials, exploring new means of presentation, establishing technical standards and shared software, and developing ethical standards and best practices, institutionalization of the role of online dialogue would increase the effectiveness of dialogue and decrease its per-production cost.

Adopt standards for the exchange of data associated with dialogues. This technical step will facilitate interoperability among the online dialogues sponsored by different units and levels of government. This will speed the adoption of online dialogues as a tool for public involvement and (1) facilitate parallel discussions that involve state and local governments or state and federal governments, (2) make it possible for researchers to study and compare different dialogues, (3) allow for sharing of resources including presentation tools and background materials, and (4) provide economies in the production of dialogues by facilitating the development of common software platforms for federal, state and local governments.

Develop ethical standards and best practices for participatory interchanges. As online civic dialogues become more numerous, ethical standards and best practices will be needed to assure that the process is transparent, non-partisan, fair, and worthy of the participants' trust. The development of ethical standards and best practices will encourage sponsors and organizers to recognize, think through and agree on their roles and responsibilities for each dialogue element, including the identification of stakeholders, balanced presentation of information and the use that will be made of public contributions to the discussion.