Introduction

Online dialogue offers a new type of public space and a tool for civic engagement that is inherently more dynamic and interactive than most traditional exchanges between the public and policy makers. This evaluation covers an online event involving a Joint Committee of the California state legislature, formed to develop a long-range plan for education. As in earlier Information Renaissance (Info Ren) online dialogues, participants were highly satisfied with the process. This is an important confirmation, since satisfaction is an essential prerequisite for recommending online dialogue as a mechanism for civic engagement.

The online dialogue on the California Master Plan for Education (CAMP) was held June 3-14, 2002, to increase public contributions to the process initiated by the State Legislature, via the Joint Committee to Develop a Master Plan.[1] 937 people registered to take part. To our knowledge, this was the first time state legislators had been involved in an online event of this size. The Information Renaissance[2]-designed dialogue was a part of a public input process of which Sen. Dede Alpert, chair of the Joint Committee, said "I have never seen such an overwhelming interest in shaping public policy." She felt the Joint Committee "listened and we made significant changes."[3]

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The dialogue dealt with a complex policy document in a politically-charged environment. Preparation for the dialogue included seeking funding, constructing a user-friendly Web site with searchable background material, outreach to let potential participants know about the dialogue, recruiting and working with panelists, and establishing an agenda. During the dialogue, participants read and posted messages to the Web site. For convenience in reading, messages could be arranged by subject, author, date or theme, or as "threads," which group each new message with its replies – making it possible to follow the discussion as a set of conversations. These messages, together with the background material and other materials, remain online as an archive of the dialogue.

Chapters I-III describe the context of the online dialogue, its goals and the evaluation methodology, and the Information Renaissance model. In Chapters IV and V, the data gathered from registration and evaluation forms is presented and used to explore five evaluation questions. Proceeding from this data, in Chapter VI we discuss dilemmas of public involvement as they apply to online activities, and several associated organizational issues. Chapter VII develops a set of conclusions and recommendations.

In the eyes of many participants, the long-term success of the dialogue on the Master Plan will be defined by the degree to which the many provisions of the Plan are implemented. This depends on development and passage of implementing legislation, but also on the availability of financing, which at present is quite problematic. Nevertheless, implementation has begun;

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[1] The archive of the dialogue is available online (http://www.network-democracy.org/camp/).
[2] Information Renaissance is a non-profit corporation based in Pittsburgh, PA and Washington, DC that uses Internet technology to promote broad, informed civic engagement.
[3] Brice, J. "Educational Roadmap Near Completion." Associated Press (31 July 2002, byline Sacramento).

information about current legislation is available online (http://www.sen.gov.ca//ftp/sen/ committee/joint/master_plan/_home/021203_IMPLEMENTATION_EFFORTS.HTM). For the CAMP dialogue, success is perhaps best reflected in the statement of a participant:

> "Most contributors began by addressing their personal needs from their own backgrounds and/or schools. As time went on, they began to develop the 'big picture' idea and saw everything as a whole. That was great!"