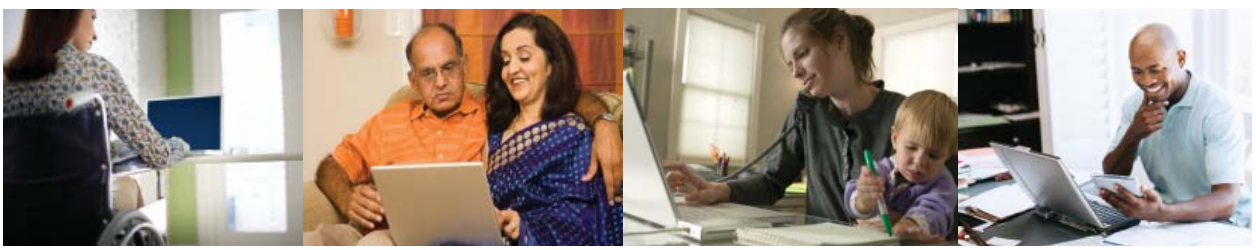
Building Democracy Through Online Citizen Deliberation



A Framework for Action

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Building Democracy Through Online Citizen Deliberation: A Framework for Action

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Preface

Building Democracy Through Online Citizen Deliberation offers a brief introduction to the rapidly emerging world of electronic or "e-" democracy. E-democracy refers to the use of online tools to empower private citizens to become meaningfully engaged in actual public policy making. This exciting trend implicates a series of serious questions of both policy and logistics that this report helps to address. The report introduces examples of the tools becoming available for online citizen consultation, and describes some of the processes through which these tools are being used around the world. It suggests how to think about e-democracy strategies within a larger context of expanding citizen outreach through both off- and online initiatives.

The ideas for this report were developed through a conference by the same name staged at The Ohio State University on November 16-18, 2005. The conference was produced by the OSU Cyberdemocracy Research Group, an interdisciplinary team organized through the Center for Interdisciplinary Law and Policy Studies at the Moritz College of Law, and supported through a grant of the Battelle Endowment for Technology and Human Affairs. Members of the CRG who participated in planning and conducting the conference were:

- Stephen R. Acker, Associate Professor, School of Communication and Director, Ohio Board of Regents Collective Action Project;*
- Maria Manta Conroy, Assistant Professor of City and Regional Planning, Austin E. Knowlton School of Architecture;
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- Gerald Kosicki, Associate Professor, School of Communication; and
- Peter M. Shane (Chair), Jacob E. Davis and Jacob Davis II Chair in Law and Director, Project on Law and Democratic Development.

The report benefited directly from the insights of the expert speakers invited to address the conference, plus the additional CRG members who helped to conduct small group discussions:

- Robert Cavalier, Teaching Professor of Philosophy and Director, Center for the Advancement of Applied Ethics and Political Philosophy, Carnegie Mellon University;
- Matt Eastin, Associate Professor of Advertising, University of Texas;
- Andrew Johnson, Associate Professor of Computer Science, Electronic Visualization Laboratory, University of Illinois at Chicago;
- Michael Neblo, Assistant Professor of Political Science;
- Alexandra Samuel, CEO, Social Signal, Vancouver, CA; and
- Lars Hasselblad Torres, former web researcher, AmericaSpeaks, and founder, Global Peace Tiles Project.

The CRG was also assisted in preparing this report by a team of Moritz College of Law students, who acted as "reporters" for every conference session. We wish to thank Matthew Bierlein, Grant Christensen, Joe Clark, Katy Delaney, Caitlin Downing, Christine Easter, Briana Godbey, Joshua Godbey, Marwan Jabar, Benjamin Larrimer, Usha Parker, Nusrat Rahman, and Katie Stenman.

We hope that this report helps policy makers at every level of government to consider more seriously the potential for enhancing public outreach through online citizen consultation tools. Motivating the revitalization of American democracy through e-democracy initiatives is our deepest aspiration.

Building Democracy Through Online Citizen Deliberation

I. E-Democracy: Definitions, Examples, Issues[1]

E-democracy refers to the use of online tools to empower private citizens to become meaningfully engaged in actual public policy making.

E-government describes government efforts to improve service delivery, public satisfaction, and administrative efficiency through the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs). E-government transactions may occur on a government-to-citizen, government-to-business, or government-to-government basis. As e-government services have expanded and citizen satisfaction with e-government services has grown, governments have turned increasingly to e-democracy initiatives. E-democracy expands the range of citizen interactions with government by moving from the delivery of government services into the actual involvement of citizens in government decision making. These trends are even advancing to the point of mobile or "m-" government and "m-" democracy. Using handheld electronics or PDA's to collect data is a new form of social monitoring that can tangibly connect government decision making to public input.

Governments worldwide have developed and expanded e-democracy frameworks. Denmark has been a leader. In the Danish system, dialogue is the key. The Danish government mandates that its Parliament listen to the public on scientific and technological issues. Citizens give input regarding the values that should constrain scientific research. This is accomplished through online consultation portals, which provide a single point of access for all

[1] This section is based on presentations by Lars Hasselblad Torres of AmericaSpeaks and Alexandra Samuel of SocialSignal.

government agencies. The United Kingdom has a similar portal known as DirectGov. In contrast, the United States has regulation.gov, which links citizen input only to regulatory issues.

E-government and e-democracy are being embraced by the political right and left, as well as by the ICT business sector. Corporations are becoming a predominant player in the market. Neighborhood America is an IBM initiative to establish a public consultation and comment process online. Pimp My Party is an attempt by the conservative Tory party in Great Britain to increase online participation and deliberation. Both national and local governments have key roles to play in the expansion of electronic democracy. National governments are more likely to have the resources to invest in developing process frameworks and identifying the most appropriate tools. Devolving these national frameworks down to local levels is critical, however, if citizens are going to play a more meaningful role in the kinds of government decisions most likely to affect their day-to-day lives.

Many of the best examples of online consultation models have evolved first outside of the United States. These successful frameworks were built around the key element of decision making. Government decision making usually takes place behind closed doors. In order to garner legitimacy for e-democracy, this pattern needs to change and decision making needs to become more visibly and transparently connected to the consultation process. People need to be able to see a connection between their input and a policy outcome. Without this clarity, the government cannot expect people to become motivated to use online tools.

Before launching an online consultation or deliberation, it is critical:

a) to decide to what extent you are committed to taking public opinion into account in your decision making and

b) to communicate clearly the nature of that commitment.

It is critical to design ways for citizen-participants to become informed about issues under discussion through an approach that representatives of a wide spectrum of ideas will all accept as fair.

Successful consultation models embrace the principle of equality. Leveling the playing field faces a special challenge online because of the varying levels of comfort that people have with technology. Moreover, once engaged online, participants need to be nominally equal in the consultation process. Everyone needs to have equal access to the information record and equal opportunities to record their views.

Online consultation is virtually meaningless if the people involved are not informed. In order to participate meaningfully, people need information in an accessible form. To avoid overwhelming participants with too much information, information needs to be filtered for quality. Perspectives offered by stakeholders need to be identified as a check on bias. The ways in which the information is disseminated need to take into account and to accommodate various literacy and comprehension levels, as well as language barriers.

Dialogue Circles exemplifies a common model for online consultation. Ottawa, Canada uses such a system of inter-modal consultation that combines both online and offline channels. This is the traditional method of e-consultation. Issues, such as public policy on mental health or the future of the public health care system, have been discussed with the public through online workbooks. Online workbooks provide various scenarios that participants "walk through" and on which they then give informed opinions, by ranking the importance of different factors. This approach is "scalable" – it can be adapted to bring in large numbers of participants – and is an excellent way to break out of the pure policy discussion model. But it involves some significant time commitment from each participant, anywhere from forty-five minutes to an

hour.

A successful consultation model in the United States was Neighborhood Knowledge Los Angeles. This project used community mapping to make resources available on problems that were plaguing the community. The organizers used information on tax and utility delinquency to predict crime rates. The information and resources were even used by city planners when making decisions. The site trained community groups to work with the information provided and empowered the citizens to act even if the government did not. In this model, the community groups played an active role and took the initiative to use the information to improve their community. Youth United for Coming Change used mapping also to locate fun places for young people to hang out, while senior citizens mapped public nuisance sites and used the information to testify at administrative hearings.

Consultation is based upon asking advice, while a deliberative model takes that advice and ties it to actual decision making,

When people engage with difficult issues in a deliberate and informed way, the quality of their input improves, and it becomes more likely that government policy makers will take public opinion into account. Because there is likely to be a significant gap between the knowledge of government officials and the ability of most public participants to address public policy issues, the quality of information provided to participants is central to the success of online deliberation. Information design is also critical if governments are to avoid creating avenues for consultation that will appeal only to a relatively elite stratum of the community. A variety of approaches exist to address the need for public education – workbooks, expert presentations, online tutorials, even multi-session online seminars.

Any successful process design requires trade-offs between the intensity of small groups and the representativeness of larger samples.

Of course, public participants may be concerned that background information is being presented in a way that is skewed towards the perspective of special interests. One way to counter bias in the presentation of information is to involve as many stakeholders as possible in preparing the online educational approach pursued. If each interested party contributes to the framing of a deliberation scenario and the process is transparent, bias is likely to be reduced and trust increased.

Consultation and deliberation are complementary, yet distinct terms important to an e-government framework. Consultation is based upon asking advice, while a deliberative model takes that advice and ties it to actual decision making. The spectrum moves from public input to public processing. The degree of empowerment for the individual citizen is greater in deliberative models.

Two U.S. case studies help show the appeal and challenges of online deliberation. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency contracted with an organization called Information Renaissance to initiate an online public conversation concerning EPA policy on public input into agency decision making. Over 1000 participants signed up and 350 people posted at least one comment in the course of two weeks. EPA decision makers were very involved in the process. EPA provided an online briefing book in HTML format, with downloadable sections. The briefing provided an overview of background information and links to additional sources. The subsequent forum was based on a threaded discussion model, which allowed people to form groups and respond to online discussions based on the subject matter of their comments.

EPA staff responded to online posts they thought called for agency responses, although some discussants expressed a desire for a firmer EPA commitment to implementing commenters' views. In fact, the dialogue was never tied to a specific decision making process. Although staff reported the dialogue to be valuable, it is not clear how the dialogue affected EPA decision making.

Another case study involves WebLab, which staged a two-week online consultation following a large face-to-face consultation in New York City concerning the site of the former World Trade Center. There were 800 participants, of whom 550 were actively involved. While the decision makers were not involved in the online dialogue, there was ample media coverage and the event was reported by bloggers. The discussion focused on key issues, including transportation, sanitation, and resource management. The background materials for the online deliberation were the same as for the face-to-face conference, and they helped people to work through the key trade-offs. These materials were augmented by the results of the face-to-face consultation. Some of the deliberation groups were facilitated and others were not, but the non-facilitated groups tended to organize around a leader.

Every online process design entails tradeoffs. You should consider how the tradeoffs relate to your public outreach objectives and choose design elements that will emphasize those objectives, even at the cost of others.

Although neither model worked perfectly, each was a significant attempt to create a successful online deliberation model. Any successful process design requires trade-offs between the intensity of small groups and the representativeness of larger samples, the deliberativeness of synchronous meetings and the convenience of asynchronous discussions, unstructured information and workbooks, plain text and rich media formats, many-to-one and many-to-

many discussions, and expert facilitation and self-facilitation. A successful model will address each of these issues.

The future of online deliberation is being shaped by emerging trends in online communication generally. So-called weblogs or "blogs" are now ubiquitous. There are over 14 million blogs and over 30 million Americans read blogs. Blogs are an important form of information provision from the ground up. They are essentially a form of unstructured consultation. Online deliberation models can now tap into the perspectives that are already exist on blogs. This is a promising approach because blogs can be easily aggregated. There is a strong motivation for self-expression to be turned into a powerful engine for public participation.

Governments need to develop consultation in an environment in which people can discover ways to take action themselves, not only when the government is also involved.

Wiki technology is another tool for collaborative interaction that helps participants work toward creating the seamless document in the end. Underneath the surface of the document, the Wiki structure provides complete records of the internal debates, discussions and drafts involved in creating the final document.

The convergence of community and consultation is essential to the future of online deliberation. The value in such discussions is building a sense of community. Governments need to develop consultation in an environment in which people can discover ways to take action themselves, not only when the government is also involved.

II. Public Outreach Strategy: The Threshold Questions

Designing a workable online citizen consultation initiative cannot be accomplished in a vacuum. A sound initiative can be created only within the framework of a sensible overall public outreach strategy that will inevitably incorporate both face-to-face and computer-mediated communications. To explore these issues, conference participants broke into small brainstorming groups to think about optimal public outreach strategies on such diverse civic issues as creating a city dog park or undertaking municipal ownership of a wi-fi broadband network. A consensus emerged that any agency contemplating online consultation has to start with four threshold questions:

If your agency is staging a public consultation, you have to be clear - both within the agency and in dealing with the public - as to the nature of the consultation.

The first two are:

(1) What is the purpose of the outreach and

(2) in what ways are decision makers prepared to taking public sentiment into account?

If your agency is staging a public consultation, you have to be clear – both within the agency and in dealing with the public – as to the nature of the consultation. There may be appropriate differences in approach if you are consulting the public at a very early stage or addressing some still loosely defined topic or rather seeking public input as to the precise resolution of an already well-defined problem. There may be considerable advantages, in terms of both public motivation and the quality of eventual decision making, if official policy makers seek public consultation at a stage early enough to allow

public contributions genuinely to shape the decision making agenda. On the other hand, if consultations occur only at early stages, members of the public may perceive that they were never really told the precise steps or options that the agency was seriously contemplating.

A public consultation is unlikely to have the trust-building impacts your agency hopes for if you don't have the resources necessary to follow through in staging a high-quality effort.

You will also need to communicate clearly how the agency will use public input. Are you committed to making public responses the basis for your ultimate decision? Are you at least committed to taking account in some formal way of various expressions of sentiment, whether or not you ultimately follow them? Will there be a follow-up report to let the public know the impact of public participation and your decision making? There must be some kind of final statement of "loop closing" if any future participation is anticipated.

A third question is whether you are likely to have available to you the resources necessary to conduct a high-quality public consultation. Many informal discussions of public consultation and planning issues lead somebody to say something like, "Maybe we can create an online gaming environment in which anybody can play with the various possibilities for rezoning downtown and see how they look!" For most municipalities, at least at this point in history, the costs of such an effort are categorically prohibitive. On the other hand, there may well be resources made easily available that would facilitate an exercise far more meaningful than the traditional open public meetings, which are often staged without adequate preparation and fail to involve a representative sample of the public. As discussed in later sections, however, even more modest efforts will require a dedication of some staff time and energy to designing, monitoring, and digesting the results of the consultation. A public

consultation is unlikely to have the trust-building impacts your agency hopes for if you don't have the resources necessary to follow through in staging a high-quality effort.

A final threshold question is how best to notify the public of the issue under discussion and how they can participate in its consideration. In order to engage the public in a deliberative process the public must be notified that an issue is under discussion. Using libraries and community centers as hubs for information, utilizing online surveys that combine and mix different online consultation techniques, providing participation opportunities in face-to-face groups, and using the media as a vehicle to educate the public and publicize the process, can lead to opening the door for a more engaged public. Even if an online process is contemplated, initial public meetings should be considered to introduce the online process, explain it and allow for answers and questions. Additionally, city information web sites or publications, churches, community centers, supermarkets, and neighborhood associations can all be used to spread the word about public policy consultations. Some creative methods such as putting information about the issue and related websites in utility bills may also be helpful to reach the public. In order to achieve maximum involvement, a mixed approach is the best solution, but needs to be planned in advance so no one can reasonably feel they had no opportunity to "get in on the ground floor."

Even if an online process is contemplated, initial public should be considered to introduce the online process, explain it and allow for answers and questions.

III. Key Issues of Online Consultation Design and Deployment

This section of the report summarizes the deliberations of five groups of conferees, who organized to address five critical questions that any organization must face in planning for effective online deliberation.

Case Study: America Speaks

A. How to Attract and Sustain Citizen Participation

[Moderator: Lars Hasselblad Torres]

Lars Hasselblad Torres, former web researcher for AmericaSpeaks, drew on the AmericaSpeaks experience in organizing public deliberation to discuss how to attract and sustain citizen participation. For its face-to-face deliberation sessions, AmericaSpeaks employs large open spaces with up to 3,000 people deliberating in one room. These forums generally last about six hours, and are usually scheduled on Saturdays. The participants, who are all provided with the same background materials, are divided up into groups of ten for deliberations. A lead facilitator provides technical information to the entire group. Additionally, a moderator is placed at each table. The moderator's purpose is not to provide technical data or answer questions, but rather to facilitate conversation and keep the group on task.

Any participant who has a question can raise a card. Generally, there are both planners and political officials available who can go over and answer the question. Each table is also provided with a laptop computer which participants may use to record the points that they have agreed upon. These points of agreement are transmitted to the

"theme team." There is one "theme team" per each 10 tables.

The data for each "theme team" are consolidated so that trends across the groups may be tracked and displayed on each team's screen. Large screens placed throughout the room display the common themes arising from the group deliberations. The participants can vote on these themes using key pads at their tables. Although participants deliberate freely within their own small groups, they do not address the group at large as individuals.

Case Study: America Speaks

The AmericaSpeaks team makes a strong effort to attract participants who provide a representative sample of the public at large. However, the attitudes of those who choose to participate vary significantly from those who do not. The general goal is to get an inclusive group of people with a good demographic mix. Three levels of recruitment are used. Mainstream media recruiting begins two to three weeks prior to an event and includes full-page ads in newspapers and magazines, along with radio spots. Stakeholder network communications also begin two to three weeks before the event. Through this recruitment avenue, the team contacts and organizes constituency groups likely to share some vested interest or stake in the outcome of the deliberations. Finally, on-the-ground recruitment begins one to two weeks prior to the event. This technique is used to respond to any visible gaps in the representative groups already interested. During on-the-ground recruitment, participants can register by phone, fax, or the web. Under a best-case scenario there would be more affirmative responses than available seats, but this is not generally the case. Usually about 75 per cent of the

spots will be filled prior to the event and the other 25 per cent will be filled on the spot the day of the event.

Case Study: Rebuilding Ground Zero after September 11

Lars next discussed two examples of public forums that illustrate some of the issues organizers are likely to face in motivating discussion. In the first example, AmericaSpeaks worked with Mayor Anthony Williams of Washington D.C. to stage a citizen summit concerning the budget. Issues arose when the topics participants wanted to discuss were not always among the topics for which organizers had prepared. For example, discussants at nearly 20 tables were interested in discussing the closing of community hospitals, but this was not a topic on which information resources had been prepared in advance.

The second example discussed involved planning for the rebuilding of Ground Zero in New York following September 11. This project used a large scale public forum of about 2,500 people followed by a ten-day on-line forum with about 800 participants, around 560 of whom were fairly active in the deliberations. The on-line forum attempted to replicate the procedures of the live forum by having separate chat rooms where deliberations were carried on asynchronously. All groups worked from the same workbook and, at the end of each workbook, there was a summary of ideas from the live forum.

There was more active participation during the public forum than in the on-line forum for a number of reasons. First of all, there were only ten people per table during the live forum, but twenty to twenty-four per chat room in the on-line forum, making it more difficult to moderate and come to agreement. Additionally, the live forum resulted in

a real-time summary that was covered by the media while the on-line participants were less motivated because their deliberations lasted for days and received less attention. Thus, the preliminary report from the on-line forum did not have the same intensity. Lastly, there was no separate media outreach for on-line participants other than on-line advertising.

An important question planners may face is how to get public participation on a technical issue like transportation. According to Lars, Australia's Prime Minister routinely engages the public on technical infrastructure projects. Therefore, public forums held in Australia provide a good reference or resource for how such projects can be carried out effectively. To get people excited about such issues, it is important to frame them in terms of how they are important to the public. Demonstrating what will come out of the consultation also becomes critical because many potential participants may feel that when they have previously shared their input with the government, nothing came out of their efforts. The burden is on the convener to show that a consultation can be effective.

The champions (community organizers, elected officials) of civic engagement need to be on-line in order to attract their constituents.

Another question raised by the conference participants involved how to build online grass roots support for civic deliberation. In such efforts, leadership is very important. The champions (community organizers, elected officials) of civic engagement need to be on-line in order to attract their constituents. The leaders should communicate the relevance of the project to constituents and explain the benefits to individuals, one benefit being the connection to a greater pool of information resources. E-mail is arguably the most useful medium for keeping people informed and engaged. Deliberation planners should also search blogs that

may attract potential participants and that may be able and willing to advertise opportunities for deliberation.

An ongoing forum will keep citizens engaged and educated on the topic even if they do not actively participate.

Once the conveners of deliberation engage the citizenry, it is critical that they act to sustain engagement. Sustaining is an important activity both to deepen the legitimacy of the forum by keeping participants sufficiently involved to track the outcomes of their work and as a way of solidifying connections – creating mechanisms for people to stay in touch for their own problem-solving activities and to continue to provide feedback to public officials. For these purposes, it is helpful to give people an ongoing forum to continue learning about certain topics even if they do not have time to carry on the same level of active participation. Constituent/consumer relationship management tools can be employed for this purpose. Such tools may allow users to tell conveners what level of engagement they are interested in (i.e. on-line chat, email updates only).

B. What Practical Issues of Technology, Organization and Personnel Arise for Governments Seeking to Implement E-Democracy?

[Moderator: Alexandra Samuel]

Case Study: Planning a local online consultation

This breakout session explored a series of practical considerations involved in implementing an online consultation. The group was asked to imagine we were working in the planning department of a city government and have just been asked to organize an online consultation process. The consultation is set to launch on January 1st regarding the issue of municipal Wi-Fi, that is, should the government be involved in the construction, ownership, or operation of a service to provide broadband access within our region? The group first considered the initial issues that would be involved with such an endeavor, evaluated secondary considerations, then set forth the worst-case scenario and the corresponding planning and prevention for the potential occurrence of these types of events.

Initial Considerations

Initial considerations include audience characteristics and goals. One preliminary step is to construct an audience "sociogram," indicating who the intended audience is, what interests they represent, and their relationship with each other. This information could help to define a mandate for the online consultation, clarifying its goals and breadth. Once goals have been set, local government must consider implementation issues. Officials must assess the public's access to technology, as well as their knowledge in using technology, and prepare to provide significant public

access (if home access is a limiting factor) and technology education.

Case Study: Planning a local online consultation

Numerous logistical considerations accompany the government's implementation of online consultation. With regard to infrastructure, government officials need to evaluate whether the technology management can be handled in-house or will require consulting, and how the technology will be staffed. Turning to information, local government must evaluate the source and form of the data that will be distributed to the public. They also must determine the broad structure of the online consultation: group to group, person to person, or some variant in-between.

Budgetary concerns also factor into the group's initial considerations. These concerns include costs for a potential public outreach campaign, facilities, training, facilitation and evaluation of the consultation, and a myriad of technology issues. Technology costs include licensing, server costs, support, testing, setup, and deployment (plus consulting costs if necessary).

Secondary Considerations

After reviewing these initial considerations, the group then refined these ideas with a secondary evaluation. The group focused on logistics in a broad sense, evaluating the proper work flow for implementing the online consultation. This includes project management, and would encompass scheduling the purchase of technology and outreach activities.

Logistics could further be broken down into technology issues and policy issues. Officials must consider the limitations of technology, including

bandwidth and technology capacity and other infrastructure variables. After evaluating these, officials must then make structural decisions, such as whether to design the consultation in synchronous or asynchronous fashion and how to address access issues. Once the system has been designed, officials must evaluate its usability, test it for reliability and generally troubleshoot.

Case Study: Planning a local online consultation

On the policy front, the main concern was how to handle the actual substantive issue being discussed in online consultation. This encompasses how to frame the questions set forth in the consultation (perhaps via a workbook format) and the level of personal participation that policy makers should and would have in the process. Additionally, the group briefly discussed general legal issues germane to local government's role in facilitating the online deliberation.

Worst-Case Scenario: Identification, Planning, and Prevention

Alexandra Samuel distilled five categories from the initial and secondary considerations within which to analyze the issues that arise in online deliberation. These broad categories were: technology, public relations, logistics/project management, policy, and budget/legal. The group as a whole brainstormed as to what would be the worst-case scenarios for each of these categories. Alexandra then broke the larger group down into small groups to brainstorm responses to the worst-case scenarios.

Technology. Technology by its nature presents a variety of options for failure. Failure can come from external forces such as a power outage or hackers. Internal forces can also contribute to failure, with

examples being improperly configured technology, a system crash, or the inability of a system to handle the number of users.

Case Study: Planning a local online consultation

The technology small group proposed testing, training and system safeguards to combat the worst-case scenarios. As a preliminary step, local government officials should acquire, configure and test the system well before the deliberation occurs. Next, both end users and staff should be trained in the proper use and maintenance of the technology. Staff should be further cross-trained to ensure redundant staff skills. Before the online deliberation, officials should predict the number of users.

For those managing the system, it is easier to work with a known maximum number of participants. The predicted number of users may result in invitation-based participation or limiting the number of participants in some way. In the event that the system does fail during the deliberation, officials must establish a technology contingency plan. This may include a number for participants to conference call or a number users can call for technical and/or software support. Finally, the system should have an easily retrievable backup (although this admittedly may be difficult depending on budgetary considerations).

Logistics/Project Management. The predominant problem for the logistics category is the lack of a contingency plan. There are a variety of areas in which the online deliberation could experience difficulties and the lack of contingency plans would present significant challenges to combating failures. Specific sources of failure might include the death of the system administrator (morbid but relevant as an illustration), a lack of

knowledgeable staff and issues with space and facilities.

To combat potential problems, the logistics group stressed structure, training and testing. As an initial matter, officials should consult with colleagues who are experienced running an online deliberation. In implementing the deliberation, officials should focus on cohesive planning among all those involved, including establishing a clear chain of command and setting up a Gantt project scheduling chart. Further, implementation of the deliberation should be compartmentalized to help isolate and mitigate potential failures. As a preliminary matter, officials need to train end users and deliberation facilitators, either in person or by distributing training literature. In implementing the technology, officials should coordinate with ISPs to ensure smooth functionality and test the technology before running the deliberation. For protection, officials also need to prepare contingencies in case of failure. Local government needs to plan for missing data and set up back-up plans to conduct the deliberation either face-to-face or through teleconferencing in the event that the online deliberation runs into problems.

Case Study: Planning a local online consultation.

Public Relations. The worst-case scenarios for the public relations category range from news to culture. There could be a situation where an important news story breaks around the same time as the online deliberation, limiting public exposure to the deliberation. Also, there could be an error in the publicity or the publicity simply could not have been sent. Lastly, the publicity and news regarding the online deliberation may be affected by cultural issues, the most significant problem being a potential language barrier between officials and potential participants. The overarching worst-case

scenario would be no or low participation in the deliberation.

Case Study: Planning a local online consultation.

The public relations group proposed numerous means to combat low participation. While acknowledging that officials cannot control compelling national or local news, local government can use a variety of means to publicize the deliberation. Officials can use multiple media promotions, including press releases and personal contacts. They can also use nontraditional outreach, such as churches, schools and e-mail. Content regarding the deliberation can be distributed, posted, and promoted both online and offline, with all outgoing materials subject to multiple reviews to limit the possibility for errors. Officials can become even more active and organize small group meetings in the community to promote and track interest and awareness (or perhaps use focus groups to identify issues). Officials may also want to poll the public to ascertain the level of awareness. Addressing the language barrier, all of the documentation and transcripts for the deliberation should be translated to accommodate participants' needs. (This may be accomplished by volunteer translators.) Local government should also consider conducting language- or other attribute- specific group meetings to address concerns and provide information.

Policy. Turning to the policy category, the major worst-case scenarios involve leadership and politics. Of course, a clear problem from a policy standpoint would be neglecting to include a relevant issue in the online deliberation. However, policy problems may arise for political reasons: leadership that heretofore supported the deliberation may defect, or there may be a political backlash toward the process, substance, or result of the deliberation.

The policy group recommended expectation management, issue identification, and communication procedures to prevent against policy related failures. At the outset, officials should identify all stakeholders, consider their accompanying issues and power relations, and notify leadership of the stakeholders' interests. Then officials should conduct special outreach to stakeholders, perhaps establishing a stakeholder steering committee. This committee could help focus on preferred outcomes and provide a forum for dissenting views. From an internal standpoint, government officials need to present a clear objective and manage expectations regarding the online deliberation. This could perhaps be done by preparing a one-page overview of the process (which could be vetted by the steering committee). Additionally, all high-level contact within local government should be identified to ensure adequate damage control if the circumstances require it. The broad goals of the policy group were to eliminate surprises and maximize inclusion.

Case Study: Planning a local online consultation.

Budget/Legal. The worst-case scenarios for the budget/legal category are budget cuts and lawsuits. Officials could be subject to an unexpected budget cut or bankruptcy of the technology (or other) supplier. Additionally, local government could be subject to lawsuits, ranging from allegations of unconstitutional censorship to failure to comply with disability rights statutes, and may have issues stemming from user authentication.

To combat the worst-case scenarios, the budget/legal group considered flexible budgeting and legal protections. First, the group proposed that local government use a "scalable" budget so as to better respond to economic changes.

Case Study: Planning a local online consultation.

Second, officials could look for alternative sources of funding, including state and federal grants or advertising revenue. To prevent legal complications, the online site should include notice stating how the information on the site will be used and post a privacy policy. Structurally, content on the site could be filtered as opposed to deleted to mitigate censorship issues. Lastly, the site should incorporate a disclaimer limiting liability.

Online Deliberation on a Tight Budget: Final Thoughts

To conclude, Alexandra used a budgeting exercise to boil down each of the five categories to their key components. Alexandra asked the question: assuming the online deliberation would cost $500,000 and you're budgeted $50,000, what are your most important considerations?

First, everyone agreed that expectations management was critical. You can only do what you can afford, and expectations should not exceed what is fiscally reasonable. For the technology category, the critical consideration was software. Technology drives the deliberation, so logically money should be devoted to ensuring adequate and effective software. The logistics group focused on ensuring adequate facilities. Extensive contingency planning could prove expensive, so time and money should be devoted to ensure that the original facilities are sufficient. The public policy group chose to focus on providing notice to the public. To cut costs, the group proposed utilizing earned media and public relations as opposed to advertising. The budget/legal category focused on a scalable notice and filtering system to help protect against legal challenges, and also proposed making heavy use of in-house counsel to meet the local government's legal needs.

C. How Can Communities Help Prepare All Citizens to Participate Effectively in E-Democracy?

[Moderator: Matt Eastin]

Successful e-demoncracy initiatives may need to begin with discrete, realistic goals.

In order for online consultations to be as inclusive as possible, conveners must do their best to overcome inequalities in technology access, technology skills, and participant motivation. These hurdles are interrelated. People are motivated to act if they perceive potential benefits flowing from their actions. In the world or civic engagement, what this means is that people need to believe that their voice will count. People are most likely to anticipate prospective benefits from online participation, however, if they believe in their own efficacy – that they have the skills to navigate an online process in a way that will produce the results they want. And, of course, the requisite skill level depends upon technology. Technology that is simple in some respects, e.g., text-only forums, may make life difficult for some users, e.g., those who find it easier to communicate effectively via audio.

Sensible strategizing for online consultation requires planners to consider a community's technological environment and community norms. To explore these themes, the group considered two hypothetical consultations in socially distinctive environments.

The first was a hypothetical consultation on the merits of aggressive policing. One could imagine a mayor considering an initiative to change the community climate by fighting the so-called "broken window syndrome," the aggressive policing of minor infractions such as graffiti or petty vandalism in order to change the sense of

Keeping emotions and tempers under control in online discussion can be challenging because people often act online differently from their face-to-face interactions.

community attitudes towards the maintenance of social order. Exclusive reliance on online consultation might be problematic in such a discussion because key neighborhoods affected might lack sufficient technological resources for city residents to participate conveniently. Moreover, the issue of moderation would have to be carefully considered because the topic could well become emotionally charged. Planners would probably do well to consider how schools, churches, libraries and community centers could become sites for discussion. Online discussion could be made available, and its availability could become an occasion to use these community outlets to disseminate instruction on technology use. Getting people to bridge their different views of this particular topic in an urban community, however, is likely to involve substantial face-to-face interaction under any realistic scenario.

The second was a hypothetical consultation on farmland preservation. Many farmers are now online – in that sense, access may not seem a problem – but they may be less likely to have broadband access. As a result, some of the visual tools most potentially helpful to a consultation on land use may prove difficult for participants to access in a chiefly rural setting.

Mobilizing rural residents for online consultation is likely to require a strategy involving newspapers, town hall meetings, kiosks in local restaurants, and community gathering places, like local schools and libraries. "Identity management" may be a key issue in an online rural consultation because rural communities sometimes have social norms that regard the open discussion of confrontational topics as impolite. A consultation may have to be designed to foster open and honest

discussion, even though participants remain anonymous to one another. The endorsement and participation of influential community leaders may be critical to persuading people of the suitability of the consultation.

Successful e-democracy initiatives may need to begin with discrete, realistic goals. Simply pervading a community understanding that online communication for citizens is appropriate and potentially efficacious may be the right goal. Families still worry about easy Internet access in their homes, especially fearing the availability of inappropriate content to children.

Consistent communications regarding outcomes will help online civic engagement grow.

Clearly, the technological prospects for e-democracy are changing rapidly. People are more comfortable with technology than they have ever been, as evidence by the spread, for example, of Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) telephone service. Technologies take off in clusters, and, as critical masses of users in different communities begin to adopt new tools and processes, the acceptability and utility of those technologies will accelerate.

Any initiative will benefit from giving participants positive reinforcement. People need a sense of ownership – which means that the conveners of consultations need to keep participants informed as to outcomes and the relationship of outcomes to the consultation process. If understanding spreads that time spent in online civic engagement makes a genuine difference in the life of a community, its scope and significance will inevitably grow.

D. How to Establish and Maintain Norms of Civil Online Discourse

[Moderator: Michael Neblo]

Online discussions are usually well served if the goal of the discussion is clearly defined and remains visible when participants are interacting online.

This session was devoted to discussing procedures for helping participants in online deliberation to maintain civil discourse and stay on topic. Keeping emotions and tempers under control in online discussion can be challenging because people often act online differently from in their face-to-face interactions, becoming more vocal and perhaps less respectful than they would otherwise be.

Online discussions are typically moderated, although at least three different styles of moderation exist. The most intrusive moderation – having each posting individually screened before it appears – may not only be impractical, but may raise questions about the genuine openness of the forum. An alternative is to allow all postings, subject to an automated moderator/filter that may screen out postings with particular words or phrases. A third possibility is "self-moderation" in which participants rate each other's posts. Readers might then avoid reading posts that are given low ratings, providing an incentive for participants to pursue a constructive tone in making their contributions.

It is helpful in every forum to make visible a list of expected norms for civil discourse and an avenue through which people may complain about posts that they regard as libelous or otherwise inconsistent with the forum's rules. Ground rules should be laid out at the start of deliberation. Typical examples for online forums are (1) no personal attacks, (2) stay on topic, (3)

avoid discussions of interpersonal issues between participants, and (4) observe word limits (which, of course, can be automated).

Online discussions are usually well served if the goal of the discussion is clearly defined and remains visible when participants are interacting online. Keeping a statement of the discussion goal visible on the screen while writers are preparing their posts may help to keep people on topic. As a discussion progresses, these topics may need to be redefined as issues are refined and perhaps narrowed. Planners should be open to proposals from participants to redefine the issues as the discussion progresses.

People may find it easier to start dialogue constructively if they are asked, first, to identify the interests they hope will be protected in any solution to the problem at hand and why and only later, their particular position on how the problem should be addressed.

Moderators can be helpful in other ways that go beyond the screening of inappropriate posts. If it becomes apparent that discussion is becoming heated, but not productive, a moderator can suggest a variety of compromise options that test participants' comfort level with competing approaches. The explicit demonstration that alternative approaches are available that would actually take account of people's competing concerns may encourage compromise. Ironically, this may be an especially helpful technique when people who disagree on a fundamental issue realize that the failure to draft their own compromise may result in an alternative decision that no one likes. Another method for promoting civil discourse is modeling it. A forum might be started with a posted exchange among people who are invited to participate and who are committed in advance to the norms of civic discourse. Yet another technique is dividing a forum into a "Deliberation Board" and a "Rant Board." Participants might be told that, if they really want to vent, they could feel free to do so on the "Rant Board," preserving a more

There was consensus that the optimum civic outreach plan needed to be on a continuum, combining physical and virtual methods.

accommodating voice for the core deliberation. A similar idea for keeping people on topic is creating a separate discussion thread as a "parking lot" for interesting, but not immediately relevant ideas. Participants would be invited to use that thread to post issues they would like to see added to the agenda, even if they do not pertain to the immediate discussion.

Encouraging compromise, encouraging people to listen to the views of those with whom they disagree, and encouraging the identification of "common ground" can prove challenging. For consultations planners expect to be heated, it may be especially helpful to set the stage with some face-to-face discussions. Becoming personally acquainted may help people to focus on the deliberative task at hand because people with opposing views may still find each other likable and trustworthy. In the absence of a kickoff face-to-face meeting, the use of online profiles may help to foster a sense of mutual acquaintance within the group.

For more ideas to help keep discussions on topic , see Appendix Two!

E. How Can E-Democracy Tools and Face-to-Face Civic Interaction Best Be Integrated?

[Moderators: Steve Gordon and Maria Manta Conroy]

Don't think of face-to-face and online engagement as alternatives, but as complementary components of an overall public outreach strategy.

Steve Gordon and Maria Conroy have faced the issue of how to gather public opinion and disseminate information when helping a community to deal with watershed development problems. In their experience, Professors Gordon and Conroy have discovered face-to-face public meetings are not necessarily ideal for facilitating community learning when significant amounts of technical information are relevant to problem-solving. On the other hand, they have experienced online forums where getting people accustomed to the technology and speaking on topic have posed their own challenges. They invited their group to consider what combination of online and face-to-face outreach methods might be ideal for achieving effective community engagement.

The group identified weaknesses and strengths in both face-to-face and online consultation methods. (See tables on the next page.) There was consensus that the optimum civic outreach plan needed to be on a continuum, combining physical and virtual methods. In many cases, a face-to-face meeting could lay the foundation for effective online engagement at later stages. On the other hand, preparing the live audience with background information, including the possibility of online tutorials in particular subjects, could make even an initial real-space meeting more productive.

Several steps critical to an online consultation

were noted:

Most practitioners agree that, whether or not members have to disclose their identities, discussants should be required to have a single identity throughout the discussion.

- Participants must be given a clear time frame in advance, so that they know what will be discussed and for how many days. People need to know that the discussion will be concluded at definite point.

- If the consultation relates to a specific decision, participants should be informed who are the relevant decision makers and whether they will be monitoring or otherwise involved in the discussion.

Online outreach does not have to be done on an issue-by-issue basis. An agency can take steps to create a permanent online community of citizens who share a general interest in the subject matter of the agency. This requires additional strategies and poses additional issues:

The Challenges and Benefits of Face-to-Face Public Meetings

Challenges	Benefits
o Accommodating people's schedules	o Fosters greater focus on listening
o Finding convenient space	o Social cues ease conversation
o Eliciting representative attendees	o Easier to stay on topic
o Providing effective moderation (vocal minorities or power disparities when political leaders are involved may pose special issues)	o More accountability
o Effects of individual biases/trust/perceptions	o Interactive dialogue easier
o Keeping accurate meeting records/minutes	o Familiarity of the social setting
	o Refreshments facilitate constructive interaction

The Challenges and Benefits of Online Meetings

Challenges	Benefits
o Lack of focus	o Advantages of a permanent record
o Familiarity/comfort with technology and trust of technology	o Participants can go back and review the discussion
o Lack of side conversations	o Fewer disputes over what was said and who said it
o Existing infrastructure	o Convenience (time/location)
o Potential bias in the population that participates and lack of representativeness	o Prospect of anonymous participation may enable speakers to communicate more honestly and reduce social biases in listener response
o Still need to take notes	o Internet provides access to an "info-rich" environment for all
o Technology facilitates discussion but not the decision making process itself	o Participants can learn at their own pace; different learning styles are more easily accommodated
o Learning curve	o Participants can multitask
o Missing body/social cues	o The novelty of the experience may elicit enthusiastic participation
o Building trust in the process	
o Sequential structured input rather than impromptu open discussion	
o Moderator accountability (who are they?)	
o Providing effective moderation	
o Preparing the audience	
o Sender-centric environment	
o More formalized comments	
o Authentication and identity management	

Allowing anonymous participation online may promote more creative brainstorming, but deliberating over actual policy choices probably works better if people are known by some stable identity through which they can be held accountable for what they say.

Will members of the community be required to reveal their identities either publicly or at least to the agency? Will opportunities be provided for people to "brainstorm" anonymously at early stages of deliberation, even if they are required to identify themselves for any actual discussion of solutions? Most practitioners who run online communities agree that, whether or not members have to disclose their real identities, discussants should be required to have a single stable identity throughout the discussion. In other words, it might be permissible for Jill Smith to appear online as "Cityplanner07," but she should always be identified as "Cityplanner07."

A sustained program of public outreach around a particular issue can be energized by periodic face-to-face meetings. Even as opinions are solicited online, through both discussion boards and online polls, key participants should be invited to reconnect periodically in person. Likewise, when decisions are made following public consultation, decision makers should stage a wrap-up meeting, not only to share their outcomes, but also to describe their evaluation of the outreach process and the role public deliberation played in reaching their conclusions.

Effective online and face-to-face interactions have much in common. Organizers of either have to be concerned about attracting a representative sample of community opinion, eliciting meaningful participation, and getting participants to focus on the public policy issues at hand. Any successful meeting, online or face-to-face, depends on a clear agenda, access to background information, and

well-described ground rules, such as treating all participants with respect. Regardless of the method of consultation or decision making, participants must be informed of the actual decision making outcome if the consultation is to be perceived as legitimate.

Any successful meeting, online or face-to-face, depends on a clear agenda, access to background information, and well described ground rules, such as treating all participants with respect.

Appendix 1: On the Representativeness of People and Information

Gerald M. Kosicki

As a safeguard, organizers should monitor the recruiting in terms of basic demographic variables, such as gender, age, income, race and education, to ensure that the recruiting is proceeding without bias.

Democracy is fundamentally about equality and inclusiveness, and, thus, the effectiveness and legitimacy of technology-enhanced public consultations and e-democracy projects depend to a great extent on their representativeness. Representativeness can mean many things but, at a minimum, it has to do with the extent to which the people who participate and offer their opinions are like the community from which they are drawn (Canovan, 2005). Representativeness can also apply to information. The aim of this essay is to draw attention to both meanings.

E-democracy projects should formulate plans that can ensure the participation of a representative group of citizens. Depending on the project design and purpose, sometimes it will be possible to select the participants. In other situations, it will be necessary to rely on people who volunteer to take part. In both situations, however, it is important to keep in mind who are the people of interest and how the organizers can recruit and encourage as representative a group as possible to participate.

The best way to do this is to conduct some form of random selection process and invite people on that basis. Of course, all of the people selected will not be willing or able to attend. But, if they are replaced by other people selected at random, the organizers can be said to have selected people by a defensible scientific random process. This is important because it is the best known way to

ensure representativeness and is widely recognized as the gold standard for selecting participants when one needs a representative sample. Notions of random sampling are widely used and understood and are typically the basis for claims of representation. This is true to such an extent that it is hard to imagine claims of representativeness without some variant of random sampling.

Recruiters should account for no-shows and refusals when determining how many citizens to recruit for a specific project.

Depending on what is required of the people you try to recruit into your program, you might have to invite and secure the acceptance of a great many people in order to get the number that you need to show up. One objection to this process might be that the proportion of people who finally do participate is only a small fraction of the total number invited. If your project is time-consuming or difficult, this will be particularly true. However, non-response is not the same as non-response bias. In other words, people may decline to participate for many reasons and their nonparticipation, in itself, does not constitute a bias as long as the people who decline are not systematically different from those who do choose to participate. This is unlikely to happen if those who are not able to participate are replaced by other randomly selected individuals.

Planners will want to monitor the recruitment process to make certain that refusals to participate are not in some way systematic and that in fact people of all kinds are being successfully recruited into the project. As a safeguard, organizers should monitor the recruiting in terms of basic demographic variables such as gender, age, income, race and education to ensure that the recruiting is proceeding without bias. If biases are present, one would want to step up efforts to recruit the kinds of people who are being left out.

Information presented to people as a basis for discussion has to be accurate, honest, complete and balanced in order to be credible and avoid charges of bias or propaganda.

Enabling the participation of a representative sample of community members will recognize that access to technology is not universal and that significant disparities in access, level of technological ability and comfort with technology may exist due to demographic variables. This may require creative efforts to recruit an effective representative sample as well as making alternative arrangements to give people access to the necessary technology in e-democracy projects. Significant disparities in access to, use of and comfort with technology have been well-documented and are unlikely to disappear any time soon (e.g., Chadwick, 2006). Taking appropriate steps to enable the participation of an inclusive group of citizens does take some effort, but pays off in terms of the enhanced value representativeness adds to any program of democratic outreach.

Ensuring the fairness and quality of background information presented in project briefing materials is a second form of representativeness that needs to be taken into consideration in e-democracy projects. Information presented to people as a basis for discussion has to be accurate, honest, complete and balanced in order to be credible and avoid charges of bias or propaganda. This has particular importance because many e-democracy projects attempt to get people to discuss and think about topics about which non-experts may have little familiarity. First impressions tend to be lasting ones, and if your project is vulnerable to attack because your information is somehow biased, it may negate the hard work you have put into it.

Unlike the problem of representing people, which is easy to think about but difficult in practice, representing information in a balanced and neutral

manner is quite difficult both to think about and carry out effectively. We know that people are extraordinarily sensitive to the way information is framed, and sometimes even recognizing the frames that are commonly used to describe political and social topics can be quite difficult. Recasting our ideas in truly neutral ways can be quite challenging. In recent years, a substantial body of research on "framing" has been developed at the intersection of several disciplines, including Communication, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology and Linguistics (e.g., Pan & Kosicki, 2005). This research deals with information and how we organize and think about it (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Ideas of framing have been embraced by communication advisers on both the left (Lakoff, 2005) and right (Lutz, 2007).

High quality briefing materials containing useful background material about the topics to be considered are of fundamental importance to most e-democracy projects.

Framing research is not the answer to representing information properly, but it can inform the process in ways that help move the project forward. If the empirical research on framing has shown anything, it is that people are quite sensitive to changes in the way information is presented, even when care is taken to ensure that the substance of the issue remains exactly and precisely the same. Inspired by the famous experiments of Kahneman & Tversky (1984) one might vary the frame from positive to negative by stressing the fact that out of 1,000 people, 900 people would be saved versus the alternative in which 100 people would die. Noting that people prefer the alternative stated in the positive direction demonstrates a framing effect.

High quality briefing materials containing useful background material about the topics to be considered are of fundamental importance to most e-democracy projects. When people agree

to participate in an e-democracy project, they are typically provided with printed (or sometimes online) educational materials about the issues to be discussed. These materials are typically meant to put everyone on a level playing field by providing key facts about the topics to be discussed, the nature of the controversies, and the various interests and points of view that relate to these controversies. It is important to make sure that each issue is described accurately, in a fair and non-partisan manner, and in sufficient detail to be complete and useful, but without being overwhelming to participants.

Conveners take on a major responsbility for educating the participants and the quality of the outcome can be only as sound as the quality of the information driving the process.

Briefing materials typically include both specific information about the issue at hand and the larger context and background against which the issue arises. Choosing among the various histories and explanations of how an issue has evolved can be particularly challenging, especially when the total volume of materials must be limited in the interest of accessibility.

The evenhanded, non-partisan nature, credibility and completeness of briefing materials are essential features of e-democracy projects involving some assessment of public opinion or judgment. Conveners take on a major responsibility for educating the participants and the quality of the outcome can be only as sound as the quality of the information driving the process.

Representativeness, a term often applied to people, in fact applies to both people and information. The credibility of e-democracy projects is enhanced to the extent that organizers recognize this and build it into projects from the start.

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Appendix 2

Keeping Online Discussions on Topic: Blog Entries from Alexandra Samuels

Ten tips for keeping discussions on topic.

I've spent the past two days at a Ohio State for a conference on Building Democracy Through Online Citizen Deliberation, which has been a terrifically productive gathering. One session consisted of an interesting conversation about how to structure online deliberation in a way that promotes civil dialogue. We agreed that one key challenge was simply keeping online conversation on topic, and got most of the way towards a list of 10 ways to keep online dialogue on topic. I thought others might find this list useful, so I've written it up and finished it off.

Keep your goal visible. Write a clear statement of the goal of your discussion, and place it on your discussion board or chat window so that it will remain visible to all participants for the duration of your dialogue.

Keep your rules visible. Write a succinct list of rules ("no flaming," "maximum 2 mins per comment," etc.) and keep them visible on your discussion board or chat window.

Use moderation effectively — and sparingly. An effective moderator can help keep conversation on track by limiting off-topic conversation, but will be most effective if she is sparing in her interventions.

Open a "parking lot." Face-to-face facilitators sometimes create a "parking lot" — a space to write down comments or ideas that are off-topic, but still need to be acknowledged or documented. A virtual parking lot (perhaps a separate web page

or discussion thread) can play an analogous role in housing comments that don't quite fit the main disscussion.

Create an alternative channel for free-form input. If your discussion is the only opportunity for participants to have their say, they will be highly motivated to bring a wide range of ideas, interests and views to the table — even if some of these comments are outside the scope of your discussion. By providing an alternative channel (like a suggestion box or feedback form) for input, you give participants a way of voicing comments that don't fit into your dialogue process, and increase the odds that your discussion will stay on track.

Ten tips for keeping discussions on topic.

Offer outside spaces for outside discussion. Your participants are likely to want an opportunity to discuss the issues that they are dropping into your suggestion box or parking lot. Creating an "off topic" forum or e-mail list — a place to discuss all the odds and ends that don't fit into your main discussion — can help keep your dialogue focused.

Try and try again. An iterative approach to dialogue — that is, multiple phases of conversation, each with a clear goal, start, and end point — is more likely to maintain focus. Each phase of the dialogue can have its own distinct focus, and you can either narrow or broaden the scope of each phase in response to what you learned in the previous phase. So while the discussion will narrow or widen over time, each phase of the conversation will have clear goals and a clear and sustainable focus.

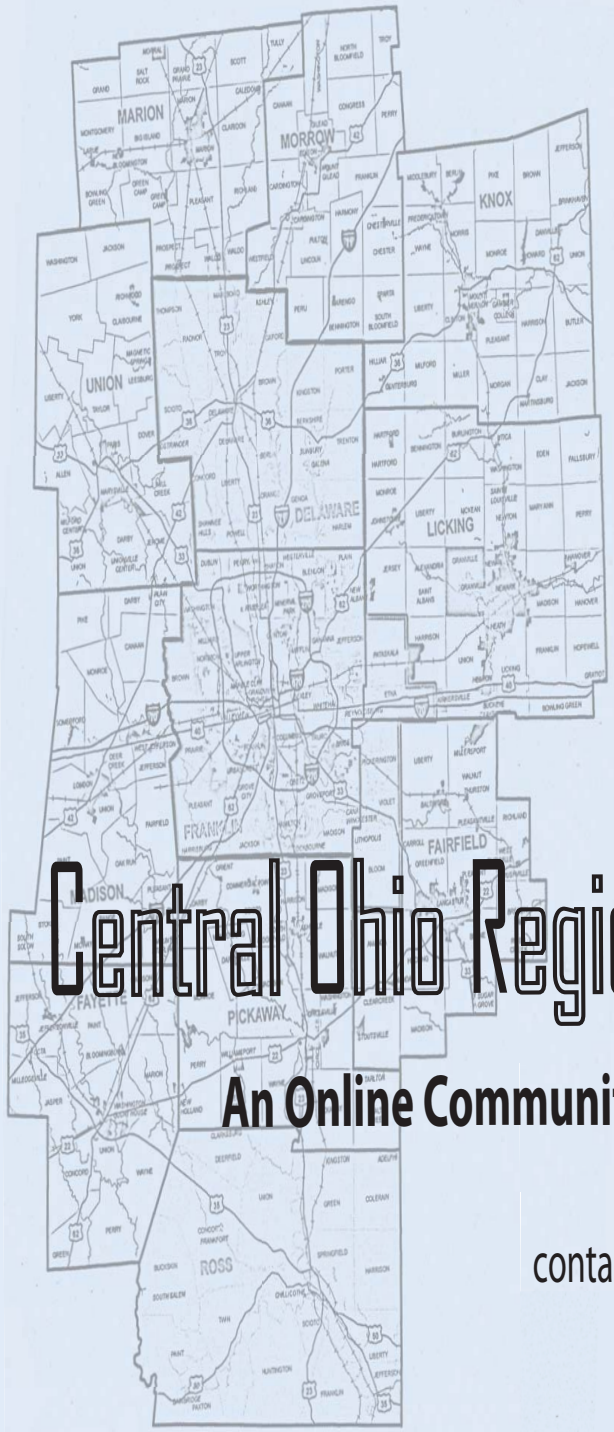
Be a role model. If you're moderating a discussion, you have to be more restrained about injecting off-topic comments or anecdotes than any of the other

Ten tips for keeping discussions on topic.

participants. That doesn't mean suppressing your personality — the occasional joke can be a great ice-breaker — but pick your digressions wisely, and keep them short. The more focused you can be, the more focused your discussion will be.

Reframe off-topic comments. Rather than pointing your finger and dismissing a comment as off-topic, try to reframe it so that it leads the group back into your main discussion. Even if you have to get creative: "Well it's interesting you mention Madonna's new hit single, because of course THE Madonna is a huge figure in the Catholic church, and the Church has been a big influence on anti-poverty policy. Does anyone else have thoughts about how community groups can help address poverty?"

Redefine "on topic." The most innovative solutions to a policy problem or dialogue dilemma often fall outside the pre-defined alternatives on the table, or the pre-defined scope of the conversation itself. When keeping conversation "on topic," it's helpful to take the broadest possible perspective on what your topic really is, so you don't lose any of these "outside the box" gems. And don't discount the value of the occasional joke or personal anecdote, either — by building social relationships and trust among participants, these off-topic conversations can make your on-topic conversation that much more effective.



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