e-Participation in Canada: Probing Online Public Policy Development

By

Robert Wayne Paddon

Submitted to the Faculty of Extension

University of Alberta

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Communications and Technology

September 30, 2009

Introduction

Life in our communities is guided by many accepted norms. Some have their roots in history and culture, for example most of us know what it takes to be a good neighbour; you watch out for one another, keep the noise down when it is late at night and return borrowed items. However, in modern Western society we have adopted many other practices in recent years. We now recycle. In fact, most municipalities are passing bylaws to ensure that everyone recycles. Such a bylaw is a public policy in most Canadian cities today. Public policies are the norms by which we agree to live with each other in society. They generally reflect the values of a majority of citizens in a community. Senior governments also create public policy whether it is changes to health care in your province or deciding to take the nation into war in Afghanistan.

Public policies have a significant effect on our lives. If it is government's role to create public policies, how then is it done and what influence do citizens have on the creation of public policy?

This investigation into public policymaking comes at a time when public access to government through information and communication technology (ICT) is at its greatest level in the history of modern society, but also at a time when, at least in Canada, citizen participation in our representative democratic processes is at its lowest. On May 12, 2009 British Columbia had the largest number of registered voters for the provincial election in its history. However, the province recorded its all-time low in voter turn out

(CBCNews.ca, May 13 2009). The intersection of the Information Age and representative democracy as it has been practiced in Canada since Confederation is posing significant issues for politicians and public administrators.

Sociologist Manuel Castells, in his multi-volume examination into the rise of the network society, makes the case that the information revolution that began in the late 20th century has dramatically changed society as we know it, just as the industrial revolution did in the 19th century. For Castells (2000, pg. 509), " it is the beginning of a new existence, and indeed the beginning of a new age, the Information Age, marked by the autonomy of culture vis-à-vis the material basis of our existence." Donald Lenihan, Chair in Public Engagement at the Public Policy Forum, argues that we are living through one of the greatest changes in history as we move from an industrial to an information society. Why is this important to Canadians? "The nature of this change is so fundamental as to affect not only our institutions, but the structure of society and who we are as individuals and communities – our sense of identity." (Lenihan, 2009, pg. 6)

The impact of the Internet on government is a topic that is garnering increasing academic interest. If at one time governance of nations, provinces or states and municipalities was an act undertaken by politicians, bureaucrats and, to some degree, special interests (such as the news media and big business) the infusion of information and communication technology in society, and in particular the Internet, has changed the exclusive nature of governance. As Jay Smith observes, modern governance that requires the necessity of engaging "a wide range of networked social actors means that without ICTs modern

governance would be difficult if not impossible. Modern governance, then, is closely connected to e-governance…" (Smith, 2004, pg. 2) This research project addresses the use of the Internet for public participation in the development of public policy, which goes to the heart of the e-governance debate.

In the United Kingdom e-Democracy is defined as the 'meeting of people, technology and politics." (Ferguson, 2006, pg. 10) Under this umbrella title are contained e-Government, e-Participation and e-Voting. e-Government has generally been defined as the delivery of government services via the Internet. e-Voting has yet to come into practice in Western democracies, but it refers to the use of the Internet to cast votes during elections and referenda. e-Participation is the use of ICTs for public participation. In an interim report to the British Parliament, it was found that efforts to promote democratic engagement had failed to take advantage of the opportunities created by ICTs. The report recommends that "government in all its forms must accept that greater commitment and investment in public engagement – not just that which is online – is an enabler of better, more transparent policy-making." (Ferguson, 2006)

In Canada, the federal government and private organizations launched an initiative in 1997 to explore the impact of ICTs on government and democracy in our country. *Crossing Boundaries* presented a research paper to the OCED in Paris in 2002 that defined e-Government in a manner similar to that used in the UK: 1) improving service delivery, 2) improving public information, and 2) extending public space through e-Democracy. This definition covers what the report defined as the fundamentals of

government: policy and service delivery. "Policy is supposed to be about *what* government does. Service delivery is about *who* does it and *how* it gets done." (Lenihan, 2002, pg. 11) The report also sets out to follow a storyline which sees ICTs as transforming modern government, at least in industrialized nations, and going well beyond the changes associated with reengineering government processes. "It pushes citizens and governments toward a realignment of some fundamental aspects of representative democracy." (Lenihan, 2002, pg. 10)

As a public administrator for most of my 30 year career which has spanned news media, public relations and public engagement, I have been fascinated and at times frustrated by the manner in which public policies are developed and decided. While I believe strongly in the importance of our representative democracy in Canada, as well as favouring our parliamentary system, I have seen first hand many of its weaknesses. I have worked with politicians who, drawing from a small, close group of advisors, insist on policy that ignores not only good planning, but more importantly, the valuable input and views of people who will be affected by the policy decision. Some of these decisions, particularly when they involve the commitment of billions of dollars for new infrastructure, set the pattern for urban development which may never be altered and will determine the existence of people for decades if not centuries. I have heard the argument that it is a politician's job to make the decisions and they were elected to do just that. I have also heard from many other people that the decision is not exclusively that of the politician and, who, by the way elected them? In recent years, the democratic mandate of elected officials has been diminishing. As fewer people exercise their democratic right to vote,

the base from which elected "representatives" draw their authority to make policy decisions is getting smaller.

Also through my career as I have watched the so-called democratic deficit grow and I have watched technology evolve rapidly. We now have the tools to truly engage citizens in their own time and space. When I started to conduct public engagement activities in the 1980s, the process, from a logistical perspective alone, was limited. People had to be advised about the meetings through local newspapers and radio. You hoped to pick a time that didn't conflict with some other community event, and you were grateful to have 20 or more people attend the session. For example, the regional growth management strategy that has guided development in Canada's third largest region was considered a public engagement success in 1995 because a total of 1,000 people participated in the process. This year, using a special website and social media in addition to face-to-face meetings, almost 45,000 people participated in a transportation planning process in Metro Vancouver. Of that total, 700 people attended the face-to-face meetings. (Paddon, 2009) The on-line dialogue was as rich and informed as any of the discussions that took place at the public meetings, and yet, despite the extent of public engagement and support for a transportation plan that emerged from that process, I am confronted by a provincial government that has dismissed the results and demands a different policy decision from the Metro Vancouver region.

It is in this context of personal interest that I have chosen to examine the phenomena of public policy decision-making. Yehezkel Dror published *Public Policymaking*

Reexamined in 1968, a book recognized as one of the leading academic works in this arena that has been republished five times. In the 2003 edition, he explained what he learned since first publishing his book. His first book caught the attention of the Israeli government and he was asked to work as a public administrator. His experience in government led him to reshape his understanding of public policymaking and he now believes that anyone who desires an "in-depth understanding" should spend a suitable amount of time in government. Dror has reached the conclusion that policy-making, which he sees as the main aspect of public life, "should be viewed as an existential phenomenon, or phenomena cluster, much too complex and dynamic to be fully caught in concepts, models and theories." (2003, pg. *x*)

I agree with Dror that the policy-making reality is too complex to be easily defined. Even if a general theory may seem beyond my grasp, there are important immediate policy issues that must be addressed in the here and now. If it is possible to better inform the debate which is emerging on democratic governance in Canada, then that is, in itself, a valuable contribution. To this end, I have convened an on-line focus group with public administrators and have probed the basic question: What issues of e-participation, as identified by public administrators, need to be addressed in order for it to become a significant process for public policy development?

To assist in focussing the discussion, the group was asked to consider recommendations it would make to the City of Edmonton, Alberta, about its approach in the use of ICTs for public engagement. In an effort to identify the City of Edmonton's spending priorities, it

collaborated with the University of Alberta to convene a consultation process to consider three strategies aimed at improving accountability with its residents, improving efficiency of its public transportation system and ensuring equality for all citizens. Use of the Internet to deliver public information and improve engagement with Edmontonians is being considered as part of the city's strategy to improve accountability. In this research project a focus group of public administrators from Canada and the United States explored specific approaches for integrating face-to-face public engagement with on-line engagement activities that may be considered by the City of Edmonton.

Literature Review

This decade the United Nations has been tracking e-government of its members around the world. While the scope of e-government includes service delivery and the provision of information, it also includes e-participation. In one of its first reports in 2003 the UN noted that while 173 of the UN member nations had some form of e-government, only 15 countries provided an opportunity for people to comment on policy issues through e-participation. Canada was included in the small group of 15. In fact, at that time, Canada was regarded as one of the leading countries. David Brown has documented the history of Canada's approach to ICT adoption from the 1990s through to the middle of this decade with its Government On-Line (GOL) initiative and notes that "GOL was sufficiently successful that for five years, from 2001 through 2005, Canada was ranked

first by the Accenture consulting firm in its annual international survey of e-government service delivery." (Brown, 2007, pg. 37) The Canadian government ended GOL in 2006.

In its most recent survey, the United Nations is focusing on the concept of "connected or networked" governance which is defined as follows: "ICT-based connected governance efforts are aimed at improved cooperation between government agencies, allowing for an enhanced, active and effective consultation and engagement with citizens, and a greater involvement with multi-stakeholders regionally and internationally." (United Nations, 2008, pg xv) Between 2005 and 2008, Canada declined significantly in the United Nations survey regarding e-participation. Where Canada was fourth in 2005 worldwide, it dropped to 11th by 2008. (United Nations, 2008, pg. 53)

In 2003 Francois Petry surveyed 522 federal officials in Ottawa to determine how policy makers view public opinion. He concluded that decision makers believe much of the public is not sufficiently informed on the issues and, as a result, are reluctant to rely on surveys and public opinion. (Petry, 2007, pg. 394) Ottawa officials believe politicians are the most knowledgeable about public opinion. They also believe election results are important indicators. Government officials consider the views of "people they know" as the most reliable source of public opinion. Public consultation findings came in slightly higher than information obtained from lobbyists and well behind public opinion polls and focus groups. Michael J. Prince argues that "even with greater consultations with outside groups… the federal government's consultative processes remain largely Ottawa-based and elitist, with policy making the preserve of a relatively small circle of actors

proximate to the national capital region." (Prince, 2007, pg. 180) Donald Savoie makes the same argument about the concentration of power in Ottawa. (Savoie, 1999 & 2003) Graham Longford is also critical of Ottawa's efforts at public engagement whether "on or off-line" and says it is "state-centred, often with governments controlling agendas and determining who participates, under what conditions, and how (and if) inputs are to be incorporated into policy outputs." (Longford, 2003, pgs 17-18) He concedes that not enough research has been conducted to determine whether Canada's on-line activities are providing meaningful public engagement opportunities for the public, but questions the extent to which on-line consultation is affecting actual decision making. "To the extent that such consultations become perceived as mere exercises in legitimation, they may risk only alienating the public even further." (Longford, 2003, pg. 18)

This situation is not limited to Canada, although the UN survey results would indicate that the problem is becoming worse in Canada. In their introduction to *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age*, Barry Hague and Brian Loader make the point that a common criticism of liberal democracies is that governments are removed and unresponsive to their citizens. The editors have reached the following conclusion from the essays in their book:

> "The evidence would suggest that government-sponsored initiatives display three common traits: first, a greater willingness to utilise ICTs to put out information to citizens than to use them as a vehicle for citizen feedback and participation; second, a tendency to focus on providing public service information to 'users' and 'customers', as opposed to outlining information and justifying policies for 'citizens'; and third, in the rare cases where input from the public is sought, a tendency to seek aggregate 'consumer/citizen' views (via e.g. electronic opinion

> polling, referenda, etc.) on predetermined issues rather than to encourage discourse and deliberation amongst citizens and allow and input to agenda setting." (Hague and Loader, 1999, pg. 13)

A similar assessment of e-government in Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. concluded that "there are grounds for reserving judgement on the extent to which e-government will deliver on its promise to reinvent government and reinvigorate the relationship between government and citizens." (Longford, 2002, pg. 5)

For almost a decade, Canadian citizens have held a different view of what their role should be in the development of public policy. At the 1999 Institute for Public Administration in Canada (IPAC) National Conference Ekos Research Associates Inc. presented survey results on citizen engagement. When asked it the government of Canada should place more emphasis on consulting citizens 87 per cent of the public agreed. Only 66 per cent of decision-makers agreed with the question. With regard to public policy development, 68 per cent of Canadians believe most of our national problems would be solved if decisions "could be brought to people at the grassroots." By comparison only 29 per cent of decision-makers agreed with the role of people in solving problems. (Ekos, 1999) If government chose to become more inclusive in its policy development, Canadians were clear in identifying their preferred method of engagement. When given a list of 10 different methods, including speaking to their Member of Parliament and attending public hearings, use of the Internet was the top choice for engagement: 67 per cent. (Ekos 2000)

Two studies undertaken in the United States to determine public satisfaction with Internet use for public policy development found similar results to those of Canadians. In 2002, the Environmental Protection Agency undertook a two-week on-line discussion about public participation. The National Dialogue on Public Involvement engaged 1,166 people from across the United States. An evaluation of the Dialogue achieved 76 per cent positive ratings from the participants. It also found 87 per cent support for more on-line dialogues in the future. (Resources for the Future, 2002, pg. 9) That same year an on-line dialogue was conducted in California for its education master plan. Again, there was high satisfaction with the on-line dialogue --76 per cent-- and even higher interest in more on-line dialogues--91 per cent. (Information Renaissance, 2003, pg. 5) The study identified several recommendations for consideration by the state government which included: "first, online dialogue should be broadly used as a mechanism for civic engagement, since in many cases it offers significant advantages over conventional public meetings; second, online dialogue should be institutionalized, so that it becomes a routine part of legislative and regulatory processes…" (Information Renaissance, 2003, pg. 5)

While much of the literature reviews national initiatives, it has been at the local government level where some of the most innovative work has been conducted on e-consultation and e-participation. A survey of best practice in the UK has found that there has been significant innovation in public participation in governance. "These have been particularly prevalent in local government, where there is a legislative requirement for authorities to consult with citizens on matters of 'best value'". (Blumber & Coleman, 2001, pg. 7) In Canada, Stefanick and LeSage provide a detailed case study of the

Muni*Mall* which was "envisioned as a one-stop on-line resource for all aspects of municipal affairs in the province of Alberta…" (Stefanick & LeSage, 2005, pg. 235) And while they conclude the project met with mixed success, they found that the electronic newsletter and various database products had significant utility for local government administrators in the province. While Canadian local governments have created websites and improved service delivery through the Internet, however, Jay Smith argues that because of this focus on service delivery there has been little democratic innovation at the local level in Canada. He cites the neo-liberal concept of reducing the size and cost of government as the primary motivator for the shift to on-line services. "Local e-government, then was framed and implemented within an ideological climate, externally and internally to government, the de-emphasized the participatory, deliberative aspects of e-democracy." (Smith, 2004, pg. 20)

It is important in a study of the role of information and communication technology in the development of public policy to understand the differences between face-to-face communications and electronically mediated communication. This topic was of significant interest to researchers at the end of the 20th century as the Internet was emerging as a transformative new communication technology. Nohria and Eccles identified three differences between face-to-face and electronically mediated communication:

1. All face-to-face communication has the participants co-present in time and space. Whereas electronic communication liberates participates in space or in time.
2. Face-to-face covers all of the senses and captures psycho-emotional reactions.

3. Face-to-face allows for rapid or almost instantaneous interruption, feedback and repair. (Nohria & Eccles, 1992, pgs 293-294)

The question of whether computer-mediated communication is a functional alternative to face-to-face communication has been addressed from the perspective of interpersonal communication motives such as inclusion, affection and relaxation. The study found that face-to-face communication was the preferred way to fulfill communication needs and concluded that "computer-mediated communication channels are not functional alternatives for face-to-face channels for most interpersonal needs." (Flaherty, Pearce, & Rubin, 1998, pg 264). The Internet could not match the social presence of face-to-face communication, yet in the decade since this research was conducted Internet technology has evolved significantly with social networking systems such as Facebook and Myspace increasing the richness of computer-mediated communication. A decade ago the Internet was text-based relying heavily on "chat, bulletin boards, and e-mail systems" that "were devoid of nonverbal clues." (Walther, Van Der Heide, Mamel & Shulman, 2009, pg. 230) Such is not the case today. Although no one is arguing that computer-mediated communication is equal to face-to-face communication, some synchronistic systems such as Instant Messaging have social outcomes in certain areas that equal or even exceed those achieved in face-to-face communication. (Ramirez Jr., Dimmick, Feaster & Lin, 2008, pg. 534) In the 1970s, Korzenny developed the theory of electronic propinquity that attempted to explain the psychological feeling of nearness that communicators experience with different media. Walther and Bazarova have revisited this theory, which did not garner wide academic support at that time to explain today's Internet

communication. Their study finds that people with well developed social and communications skills can adapt those skills to various media to achieve many of the psychological benefits associated with face-to-face communication. (Walther & Bazarova, 2008, pg. 640)

Much has been made of the affect ICT has had on social cohesion. Robert Putnam's now famous examination of changes in American social cohesion in the last half of the 20th century, *Bowling Alone*, blamed television and other electronic media for pulling people away from the important work of maintaining community groups and engaging in civic affairs. He put forward the theory that community and political involvement creates the "social capital" which is vital to democracy and the health of society. Statics Canada recently explored the impact the Internet is having on Canadian society: are Canadians more reclusive or are they now more engaged? Drawing on Putman's indicators of social cohesion the study concluded that it is time to recognize the transformative effects of the Internet.

> "Its present and future impacts should be judged on their own merit and must be clearly separated from nostalgic notions of pre-Internet community living, where people sat around pubs, cafes and parlours communing –something that has not really been the case for a very long time. Particularly in Canada, long, cold winters encouraged Canadians to stay home and watch television, listen to the radio and read. Thus the advent of the Internet is breeding a more social era, with active communication and information seeking activities compared to the more passive traditional forms of entertainment such as television" (Statistics Canada, 2008, pg 23)

The Internet, the study concludes, may be just the medicine needed to correct the deleterious effects of television on our social capital in Canada.

Conceptual Framework

The literature review reveals the magnitude of social change that is occurring as a result of electronic communications, specifically the Internet and its various forms of computer-mediated communication (if one considers mobile devices as computers rather than telephones). In the search for a social theory to help understand the change technology is having on our society, Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration is applicable. According to Prasad, "structuration theory is a carefully thought-out explanation of the *processes* whereby people routinely draw upon structures and use them, in either conventional or creative ways, thereby also sustaining and reproducing these structures themselves, albeit in somewhat altered forms." (Prasad, 2005, pg. 185) For Giddens, structuration theory emerged from his efforts to reconcile two competing worldviews of social theory: that of "functionalism (including systems theory) and structuralism on the one hand from hermeneutics and the various forms of 'interpretative sociology' on the other." (Giddens, 1984, pg. 1) In the former camp, the social whole is pre-eminent over the individual, whereas in the latter, the primacy of the human agent is used to explain social action. Giddens says of structuration theory that it should not be considered a theory of anything but rather "in seeking to come to grips with the problems of action and structure, structuration theory offers a conceptual scheme that allows one to understand both how actors are at the same time the creators of social systems yet created by them". (Giddens, 1991, pg. 204) For those that see it in the context of social change the "theory of structuration is not a series of generalizations about how far 'free action' is possible in

respect of 'social constraint'. Rather it is an attempt to provide the conceptual means of analyzing the often delicate and subtle interlacing of reflexively organised action and institutional constraint." (Giddens, 1991, pg. 204)

In applying structuration theory to the examination of Internet usage in the development of public policy I am mindful of Giddens' own caution that while structuration theory touches on many aspects of social research, it is not a research program. Instead he hopes that the "overall framework of structuration theory… is relevant to anyone writing about very broad questions of social organization and transformation…" (Giddens, 1991, pg. 213) Giddens does, however, suggest some areas of exploration that are relevant to this research project, for example, globalization facilitated by the Internet may be creating a single society; "but, if so, what are its major institutional characteristics and what are the main dynamics transforming it?" (Giddens, 1991, pg. 220)

To apply structuration theory to this research project it is important to understand Giddens view of structures and agency. Structure refers to "entire sets of social *rules* that comprise norms, procedures and conventions, and *resources* including both allocative and authoritative resources. Capital, technology, skill, and expertise are all resources." (Prasad, 2005, pg. 187) He also has three types of structures: signification, domination, and legitimation. Structures of signification are the rules and conventions that influence the interpretation of our world. Structures of domination include political and economic systems. Structures of legitimation refer to regulatory bodies, churches and judicial systems. Giddens also believes that individual agency is important in the theory because

"individuals are acutely aware of their actions and the conditions and consequences of these actions." (Prasad, 2005, pg. 188) He also believes that individuals are aware of their choices. This is important because "Giddens sees individuals as having an innate capacity to *resist* structure and to *transform* society." (Prasad, 2005, pg. 189)

Methodology

The research technique selected for this study is the focus group: specifically an on-line focus group. While similar to a face-to-face focus group, an on-line focus group has several distinct attributes which will be discussed later. A focus group is a group interview. This qualitative research technique has been identified as an appropriate technique for the study of a phenomenon that is not well known: "focus groups are particularly effective for gaining a more in-depth understanding of the topic…" (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003, pg 102) The technique is most effective when it involves people who share common characteristics. (Iowa State University, 2004) The intent of this methodology is to have a focussed discussion with people who have shared experience with a phenomenon and to gather data on a single topic. (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003, pg 103) Participants in this study are public administrators who have experience in public involvement used for the development of public policy (a shared experience) and who are specifically interested in on-line public involvement (a single topic). When experts in a specific field are interviewed as a group the focus group is sometimes referred to as an expert panel. "This expert panel is often used in forecasting

the future and other concepts that require the involvement of knowledgeable individuals." (Rezabek, 2000, pg. 3)

Over the past decade, the focus group has been adapted to take advantage of the Internet. Holly Edmunds has summarized the advantages of on-line focus groups as follows: "(a) cut costs; (b) have potential to reach a broad geographic scope; (c) provide access to hard to reach participants such as business travellers or professionals who have limited time during normal hours to participate; and (d) provides for a convenient and comfortable way of participating." (Rezabek, 2000, pg. 4) On-line focus groups can be conducted either synchronously or asynchronously. An asynchronous, text-based method was used in this research.

Tom Greenbaum, a market researcher with GroupsPlus, Inc. (2002) makes the argument that on-line focus groups are not actual focus groups. He believes that the group atmosphere is lost on-line and he does not believe that participants can have an interactive conversation that is enriched with the non-verbal communication that happens between people in a group setting. He believes there is a role for on-line research, but that it should not be labelled as a focus group. Other researchers have made similar observations. "Van Nuys (1999) has observed, for example, that a drawback of text-based asynchronous focus groups is that quite often there is less depth in the participants' responses as well as a loss of paralinguistic cues (e.g. facial expression, body posture, gesture, physical distance from the interlocutor, intonation pattern, and volume)." (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003, pg 105) Another drawback to on-line focus groups is the

limited number of questions, as compared to face-to-face groups. The data can also be hard to work with: "Both text-based asynchronous and synchronous focus groups tend to suffer from fragmented discussions making data analysis difficult." (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003, pg 107)

In addition to the challenges of on-line focus groups as cited in the literature, this research project found other problems. The research component of this project was conducted over an 18 month period because of problems encountered by conducting research on-line.

The first attempt to convene and engage recruits in this project ended in failure. I followed a process recommended by Anderson and Kanuka (2003) for the conduct of e-research. The first attempt at this on-line research project was initiated in 2008 when a number of public administrators, who had either spoken at conferences or published articles on on-line public involvement, were identified and contacted by letter inviting them to participate in this research project. The candidates were then contacted again by email to confirm they had received the letter and to determine whether or not they were interested in participating. The initial reaction of one participant was surprising. This person wanted to know how I got her name and contact coordinates, and wanted to know who I was and whether my research intentions were legitimate. After confirming my identity and defining the scope and goal of the research project, she declined participation citing concern that her discussion-board comments could have negative career implications. Another candidate insisted that her participation could not reference her

place of employment. Although one potential candidate declined to participate because of time constraints, he referred me to a colleague who did agree to participate. Most of the people I contacted expressed interest in the project.

The next step of the process was to introduce the focus group participants to the Elgg, the social media website used for the project. Elgg, otherwise known as 'Learning Landscape social software', is used by the MACT (Master of Arts in Communications and Technology) Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta, and is a social software system that enables the creation of communities and networks for people to share comments and ideas for students and graduates of the MACT Program at the U of A. Although it has some software specific characteristics, it is very similar to other social media such as LinkedIn or Facebook. I chose Elgg MACT because of accessibility to Faculty of Extension technology support staff and the fact that the existing community within Elgg MACT would have an understanding and appreciation for the research being conducted within the site. Other advantages include the ability of focus group participants to easily read comments of other group members and to engage each other; a structure that enabled me to post discussion questions in sequence; and a convenient means of storing and reviewing the research data.

To participate in the project the focus group members were sent invitations to become members of Elgg MACT. It was at this stage, in the spring of 2008, that I began to encounter significant problems. Only a few of the recruits made the effort to set up their personal profile. Two recruits told me through email that they experienced difficulty

setting up their profile and that the site was too complicated and other recruits ended their participation without advisement. My emails remained unanswered. Although the number of recruits had been reduced in size there were still enough people to conduct the project. I began the discussion with an initial post that presented the first question in the discussion guide. At this point one member of the group complained that the site was not private and that other members of Elgg MACT would be able to read her postings. In response to her concern, I created, with assistance from MACT IT staff, a special group within the site that could only be accessed by focus group members. Despite this precautionary measure, the group member continued to express concerns and make recommendations to use other social media systems. While there were numerous conversations with her on the technology, she chose not to contribute to the specific questions. By the time the private group was established it was summer and vacation season. I suggested to the group members that we postpone the discussion until September 2008. Several people, again communicating through email rather than through the Elgg MACT site, agreed to participate after summer break. When discussion commenced again in September only one person made a meaningful contribution to the discussion. After numerous emails to the group members to encourage participation, I concluded in the fall of 2008 that the recruits were not going to participate in the discussion. I thanked them for their interest and shut down the project.

Over the winter months I reviewed the failure of my first attempt and again consulted the literature. I reached to the following conclusions:

1. The social networking site required participants to go through several procedures in order to participate. They first had to obtain a password, and then set up a profile which required presenting some personal information such as experience or position and possibly posting a photo. To participate in the discussion they had to go to the site to check if there was a posting; participants did not receive notification of response. Participants needed to enter a password and navigate through the site to find the current thread of the discussion. Anderson and Kanuka (2003) recommend using mail lists over social network, or as they refer to them "conference systems", because of the complications of the media itself. Clearly, for many of the 2008 focus group members, the site itself was a major barrier to participation.
2. The 2008 focus group members were asked by a stranger to participate in a research project. As noted above, at least one person was suspicious about the request and others may well have been even though this was never stated. Nor did the group members have any relationship with one another as they were spread across the country in different government organizations or, in the case of the federal government, in different departments.
3. Finally, I may not have had enough contact with group members through direct email, or have taken enough time to explain who I was and make attempts to get to know them as perhaps I should have.

Drawing from the lessons learned in 2008, I made a second attempt at the project in early 2009. This time I engaged the assistance of the International Association of Public

Participation (IAP2). As a long-standing member and former director of IAP2 I was very knowledgeable about the characteristics of its membership base, which was an ideal recruiting ground for a project of this nature. I contacted the executive director of IAP2 who was very interested in the project and she agreed to post a "Call for Participation" in the IAP2 newsletter (an electronic publication). I published a 'Call' in the March/09 edition of the newsletter and within two days of its publication received seven responses. One participant from the 2008 group also agreed to participate in the second attempt. I believe the fact that almost all of the 2009 recruits had common membership in IAP2 was an important factor in their interest. This time, the recruits had "self-selected" to engage in the project which I also think made a significant difference in the level of engagement exhibited in the focus group discussions.

Drawing on my previous experience, I took steps to ensure regular communication with the group while we set up the new site within Elgg MACT. I explained, specifically, the challenges they would face in setting up their profile. I offered to call any individuals on the telephone to walk them through sign-up problems. I did have to provide considerable assistance to one person who could not successfully register. She also was assisted by the MACT IT staff, however, she ultimately withdrew saying that the technology was just not something she could learn.

Within Elgg MACT, I established a community, rather than just having a private location on my blog, as was the case in 2008. In this community site I posted a more casual picture of myself showing me carving salmon which was a visual suggesting inviting

community members join me for a dinner of conversation on public policy and the Internet. Finally, I encouraged the members to learn about one another, just as members of a face-to-face focus group do at the start of the session. Overall, I spent significantly more time communicating to the 2009 focus group members between actual discussion sessions, than was the case in 2008.

With the 2009 focus group successfully recruited and conversant with the Elgg MACT site, the discussion took place during the months of May and June 2009. Eight people from the United States and Canada participated in a threaded discussion that followed the initial discussion guide that was submitted as part of my research proposal. However, I did discover that the discussion questions needed to be embellished with either highlights of current events, references to related readings, or personal reflections in order to facilitate rich discussions. I also needed to respond to each member's comments in order to keep the conversation flowing between the group members. Even with these efforts, participation in the discussions varied. On some topics group members were very engaged, but on others, discussion was limited to one or two people. In the absence of any discussion with the group members about their levels of participation, I believe that one of the reasons for the differences in participation was the lack of face-to-face contact between group members. The experience for the group members was an individual one. Alone at their computer they made contributions to the discussion when time permitted. They did not have the benefit of stimulus from a moderator or other group members present in the same room to encourage engagement. Although sufficient data was

generated by the group to address the research question, it was not as rich as would be the case with a face-to-face focus group.

During July and August I conducted an analysis of the data. I have attempted to follow a phenomenological approach to analysis of the data: identifying significant phrases and sentences, formulating meanings from these and clustering them into themes. (Creswell, 2007).

On-line focus groups are a relatively new research technique. As Anderson and Kanuka note, "experimentation to determine the effectiveness of Net-based focus groups involves and initial trail-and-error process." (2003, pg. 107) Through this research project I have learned first-hand the challenges of being an on-line moderator. I believe that there is significant future research that can be conducted on on-line focus groups. I have facilitated both face-to-face groups and now an on-line group and while I am not about to judge whether they should both carry the same name –i.e. focus group – I believe the introduction of social networking technology into an established social research process requires new techniques in order to facilitate meaningful conversations between the moderator and the focus group members.

Findings

From four threaded discussions that took place over approximately a one month period beginning in late April and concluding in early June 2009, 33 significant statements were

extracted. A significant statement is one that the focus group members make that describes their experience with the topic. After reviewing the statements I attempted to formulate meaning from the statements as they regard the research questions. Table 1 includes examples of significant statements with their formulated meanings. The statements were then grouped into major themes.

Table 1 Selected Examples of Significant Statements and Formulated Meanings

Significant Statement	*Formulated Meaning*
The more you engage in a dialogue about an issue, the more you learn and become engaged in the topic itself.	Education is a key component in any public process.
You can't rely on a public meeting at 7 p.m. if half of your audience works swing/graveyard shift.	The Internet transcends time and provides opportunities to engage audiences that otherwise couldn't be involved.
The younger generation has a very collaborative and open attitude towards the creation and maintenance of knowledge (think Wikipedia), the media (think YouTube), and international relationships (think of all of the online gaming that happens internationally), it is part of their daily lives.	The up and coming generations will demand to be able to use the Internet and related technologies to engage in the political process.

Theme 1: Face-to-face vs. Online Communication

Public administrators' value direct contact with citizens in face-to-face meetings and do not believe that online public engagement will replace personal contact: "Internet tools on their own would never achieve genuine consultation." Practitioners talked about the "value" of face-to-face meetings and how the Internet would never "supplant face-to-face tools". Furthermore, they generally agreed that public administrators should "not expect" the Internet to ever replace face-to-face contact with citizens.

Theme 2: Online can enhance Face-to-Face Communication

Use of the Internet in combination with face-to-face consultation activities was identified as improving the practice of public engagement: "Electronic tools are made more powerful by combing them with face-to-face consultation tools." The Internet was identified as a preferred medium for providing information to people about a public policy because "education is a key component in any public process." It was also identified as a good tool for reaching hard to reach people when the normal practice of evenings is not effective for people engaged in shift work. One public administrator described the ideal public engagement process as follows:

> "I believe that the most effective public consultations will include a mix of methods designed to achieve different objectives, resulting in a more complex and thorough analysis. This mix will include online dialogue to reach as many individuals as possible, public forums which allow the participants to set the agenda, and expert forums which focus academics, practitioners, decision-makers and experts on the ideas and solutions that have been raised and find the ones that will work."

Another practitioner approached the matter of mixing face-to-face in a way so as to use the Internet to create networks of small groups: "I look to encourage ways for people-to-people interaction on a small scale while simultaneously linking those small-scale groups using technology to amplify an emerging voice or opinion of the overall whole (while not losing track of the various minority voices whose diversity of experience and thoughts is essential to incorporate)."

Theme 3: The Internet Changes Everything

The ability of the Internet to change politics and policy-making as we know it today was a topic that split the group into two different camps. On the one hand, some group members believe that people now engaging in online discussions on policy "will simply create their spaces to influence policies without waiting for someone to create it for them." They believe that change is coming whether policy makers like it or not. This was attributed, in part, to use of the Internet and social media by a new generation of people who "expect collaboration and openness from government." What we (baby boomers) think is essentially irrelevant, because the "up and coming generations will demand to be able to use the Internet and related technologies to engage in the political process." The recent U.S. Presidential election was cited as an example of how a new generation is using technology to influence politics and, thusly, public policy.

Theme 4: Does the Internet Change Anything?

As significant at the Internet has become in our lives and for those engaged in public policy, some of the practitioners question its power to change political structures. "I do not yet believe that effective political change that depends solely on one person interacting in isolation behind a computer screen with others through a computer-assisted medium will help to bring us all together to change politics and policy-making as we know it today." While recognizing the trend of decreasing voter turn-out as a problem in democracy as practiced in Canada and the United States, there was a belief by some that the cause of this trend is complicated and won't be solved with new technologies of

engagement: “People who feel truly disenfranchised or cynical about their government will not change their minds simply because you start a Facebook page.” Others felt that governments, while becoming “increasingly comfortable” with public consultation, “are notoriously slow at responding to new ways of doing things – mostly due to risk aversion.” The risk to government is that the dialogue will open up debates between “polarized positions in its citizenry” forcing government to take a position on issues they may wish to avoid.

Theme 5: Does Age Matter?

Age emerged as an important point of discussion. Don Tapscott’s book *Growing Up Digital* was cited as an important consideration in the online discussion. Tapscott argues that the “net-gen” is technologically savvy and embracing the Internet and in so doing changing many of that generation’s approach to commerce, politics and social capital. Many of the focus group participants believe this is an important factor to consider. However, others argued that making “assumptions” about use of the Internet based on age can be misleading. One public administrator referred to a process she had conducted wherein there were e-tools and a 1-800 phone line. The process designers anticipated that younger people would use the e-tools and older people would rely more on the telephone. To her surprise she found both on-line and telephones were used by a mix of age groups, “but all participants looked to the e-tools before anything else.”

Discussion

In this study, pubic administrators were asked to explore the question: What issues of e-participation need to be addressed for it to become a significant process of public policy development? The focus group members concluded that, at this point in time, e-participation on its own will not supplant face-to-face consultation processes as the preferred method of public consultation for public policy development. However, they also agreed that e-participation can expand the reach of the consultation process as well as enrich the dialogue through the provision of information. And they believe that e-participation is growing in acceptance with public policy decision-makers as a legitimate method to inform the development of public policy. The experience of the author in facilitating this on-line focus group and one in 2008 also pointed out some of the challenges of using Internet technology for public consultation. The medium, while making possible the ability to engage experts from across North America in a cost-effective way, is limited in its ability to attract engagement (the effort in 2008 failed because of lack of engagement) or even to facilitate participation by some people (several people from both groups who indicated an interest in participating in the discussion did not engage because they couldn't master the technology).

Considered from the theoretical perspective of structuration, transformative powers have been attributed to the Internet (Castells, 2000). Several public administrators believe a younger generation of people, who are participating less frequently in representative democracy or opting out all together, are engaging the public policy issues of the day

through networked social media. This activity, which meets Giddens definition of "reflexively organised action", is considered by some focus group members to be influencing the "institutional constraint" of current government policy-making. One group member cited as an example of this change how young people in Ontario created a Facebook page to make an argument against a law that was proposed for young drivers. She said they made a convincing argument both in terms of policy and numbers of young people supporting the change. By engaging the existing structure, the Ontario Government's process for making legislation, through a new technology that many young people have adopted as their preferred means of communication and social mobilization (Facebook), young people in Ontario changed the structure, yet became part of it. Young drivers in Ontario became part of the provincial government's legislative process even though they did so by utilizing a technology that was not part of the Ontario government's public policy development process. As one focus group member noted, "change is coming, and not because we (the policy makers) will decide to open the discussion up in online forums, but rather that people will use their own online forums to drive us towards change."

For others in the focus group, who also believe that e-participation is becoming an increasingly important part of the public policy development process, they are less inclined to see the Internet as transforming government. They believe change will happen incrementally over time in part as public administrators and decision-makers slowly accept e-participation and also in part as a younger generation that is embracing Internet technology ages and becomes part of the existing governance structure. This

view also speaks to Giddens' theory of structuration which attempts to understand "the often delicate and subtle interlacing" of organized actions to influence institutional constraints.

Regarding recommendations to the City of Edmonton, the focus group members support an outreach process that combines both the Internet and face-to-face engagement with citizens. However they caution against assuming that there is a "gap" between the information-rich young and those rich in experience. Instead, they would encourage the City of Edmonton to find ways to bring the two distinct demographic groups together in dialogue.

Conclusion

This research project has examined the use of the Internet as a public participation tool for the development of public policy. The findings of the on-line focus group support much of the literature that sees the Internet as a technology with significant potential to reach and engage many more people in governance, but as yet, it is a technology whose potential has not been fully realized. As more and more people appear to be withdrawing from our current government structure of representative democracy, at least as indicated by voter turn-out in Canada, we have not yet seen how their participation in social media resulting in a credible alternative form of governance. But as the generation born since 1970 begins to assume roles of responsibility in government, business and civil society

we may be on the cusp of what could be a transformation. The message appears to be "stay tuned."

Through the execution of this project, the use of social media for e-research has exposed a number of methodological challenges. The barriers to participation that some people found with this project are itself an interesting research project. In hind-sight I should conducted exit interviews with the members of the 2008 focus group to better understand their reasons for not engaging the project, even though they had expressed an interest in the project?

Finally, Internet technology continues to evolve at a rapid pace. In the span of the half decade that I have been planning and conducting this research project, social media has moved from being a minor aspect of the Internet to one of dominance. Twitter, for example, did not exist when I started this research project. As the technology expands the use of digital visual and audio elements for group discussions may soon be easily facilitated without the use of text exchanges. This will result in computer-mediated communication that is very similar to face-to-face communication. The advances in technology will improve the future of both e-participation and e-research.

References

Anderson, T., & Kanuka, H. (2003). *e-Research: Methods, Strategies and Issues.* Toronto, ON: Pearson Education Inc.

Blumler, Jay G. and Stephen Coleman. (2001). *Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace*. London: IPPR/Citizens Online

Brown, D. (2007). The Government of Canada: Government On-Line and Citizen-Centred Service. In Borins, S.(Ed.) *Digital State at the Leading Edge.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Castells, M. (2000). *The Rise of the Network Society.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Center for the Digital Future. (2004). The Digital Future Report: Surveying the Digital Future, Year Four. Los Angeles: University of Southern California. http://www.digitalcenter.org

Dror, Y. (2003). *Public Policymaking Reexamined.* Oxford, U.K.:Transaction Publishers.

Ekos. (1999). Citizen Engagement and Globalization: Hearing the Public Voice. *www.ekos.com*

Ekos. (2000). Attitudes of Canadians Towards Citizen Engagement. *www.ekos.com*

Ferguson, R. (2006). *Digital Dialogues Interim Report, December 2005-August 2006, An independent investigation into the use of online technologies to promote dialogue between central government and the public.* London, UK: Hansard Society.

Flaherty, L.M., Pearce, K.J. & Rubin, R.B. (1998). Internet and Face-to-Face Communications: Not Functional Alternatives. *Communications Quarterly 46*(3), 250 – 268.

Giddens, Anthony (1991) Structuration Theory: Past, Present and Future. In Bryant, Christopher G.A. & David Jary (eds.) *Giddens' Theory of Structuration: A Critical Appreciation.* New York: Routledge.

Giddens, Anthony. (1984)*The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Greenbaum, T.L. (2002). *Online focus groups are no substitute for the real thing.* Groups Plus, Inc. Wilton, Conn.

Hague, Barry N. & Loader, Brian D. (1999) *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age.* New York: Routledge.

Iowa State University. (2004). *Focus Group Fundamentals.* www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1969B.pdf

Information Renaissance. (2003, September). *Online Dialogue in a Political Context: The California Master Plan for Education.* Pittsburgh, PA: Gunn, R.W., & Carlitz, R.D.

Lenihan, D.G., Barber, T., Fox, G.,& Milloy, J. (2009). Progressive Government for Canadians: What You Need to Know. Crossing Boundaries/Canada 2020 Working Group. www.canada2020.ca

Lenihan, D.G. (2002, March). *Realigning Governance: From E-Government to E-Democracy.* Paper presented at the OECD's Public Sector Management

division's E-Government Working Group meeting, Paris, France. www.collaborativegovernment.com

Longford, G. (2002). *Net Gain? E-Government in Canada, the U.S. and the U.K.: Dilemmas of Public Service, Citizenship and Democracy in the Digital Age.* Paper presented at the meeting of the International Studies Association 43rd Annual International Convention, New Orleans, LA, U.S.A.

Longford, G. (2003). Rethinking the Virtual State: A Critical Perspective on E-Government. In Moll, M. & Shade, L. R. (Eds.). *Communications in Public Interest Volume II: Seeking Convergence in Policy and Practice*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Nohria, N. & Eccles, R. (1992). Face to Face: Making Network Organizations Work. In Nohria, N. & Eccles, R. (eds.), *Networks and Organizations: Structure, Form and Action.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Paddon, R. (2009, July). Public Consultation Report: 2010 10-Year Transportation and Financial Plan. Burnaby, BC: TransLink. www.bepartoftheplan.ca

Petry, F. (2007). How Policy Makers View Public Opinion. In Dobuzinskis, L., Howlett, M., & Laycock, D. (Eds.) *Policy Analysis in Canada: The State of the Art.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Prasad, Pushkala. (2005) *Crafting Qualitative Research: Working in the Postpositivist Traditions.* Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe.

Prince, M. (2007). Soft Craft, Hard Choices, Altered Context: Reflections on Twenty-Five Years of Policy Advice in Canada. In Dobuzinskis, L., Howlett, M., &

Laycock, D. (Eds.) *Policy Analysis in Canada: The State of the Art.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Ramirez, A., Dimmick, J., Feaster, J., & Lin, S. (2008). Revisiting Interpersonal Media Competition: The Gratification Niches of Instant Messaging, E-Mail, and the Telephone. *Communications Research 35*(4), 529 – 547.

Record low voter turnout in B.C. election. CBCNews.ca (2009, May 13).

Resources for the Future. (2002, January). *Democracy On-Line: An Evaluation of the National Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions.* Washington. D.C.: Beierle, T.C.

Rezabek, R. (2000). Online Focus Groups: Electronic Discussions for Research [Electronic version]. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 1(1)* 1-15. http//qualitative-research.net/fqs

Savoie, D. (1999). *Governing from the Centre: The Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Savoie, D. (2003). *Breaking the Bargain: Public Servants, Ministers, and Parliament.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Smith, P. (2004, March). *The Information Revolution and E-Democracy at the Local Government Level – A Failing Dream?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Montreal, Quebec.

Statistics Canada. (2008). *How Canadians' Use of the Internet Affects Social Life and Civic Participation.* Ottawa, ON: Veenhof, B., Wellman, B., Quell, C. & Hogan, B.

Stefanick,L., & LeSage, E. (2005). Limitations to developing virtual communities in the public sector: A local government case study. *Journal of the Institute of Public Administration of Canada. 48 (2),* 231- 267.

United Nations. (2008). *United Nations e-Government Survey 2008: From e-Government to Connected Governance*. New York, N.Y.: Bettucci, G.

Walther, J.B., Van Der Heide, B., Hamel, L.M. & Shulman, H.C. (2009). Self-Generated Versus Other-Generated Statements and Impressions in Computer-Mediated Communication: A Test of Warranting Theory Using Facebook. *Communications Research 36*(2), 229 – 253.

Walther, J.B. & Bazarova, N.N. (2008). Validation and Application of Electronic Propinquity Theory to Computer-Mediated Communication in Groups. *Communications Research 35*(5), 622 – 645.