

Meaningful Connections: New Trends in Public Consultation

Crossing Boundaries National Council and SES Research
July 2006

Introduction

Although policy making used to happen *inside* government, things are changing. Increasingly today it is a public process involving governments, stakeholders and citizens. Public consultation helps ensure that government decisions reflect the values, priorities and opinions of the day. But they also raise questions for governments around how to ensure that the voices being heard really reflect the views of citizens and are well informed.

New technologies may prove to be a big help here. They could enhance and transform existing approaches to consultation in ways that address some of the limitations of traditional consultation processes. In particular, governments could use them to consult more directly with large cross-sections of the public, in ways that are methodologically rigorous, involve real deliberation and are cost-effective.

But if we are to reach this goal, much work needs to be done building the skills and sorting out the methodological issues around these new tools. For example, research and analysis are needed on:

- strategies on how to get participants to work through issues together, without prejudicing the outcome;
- identifying the kind of information (and how much) needed to ensure that they are well informed;
- blending existing consultation techniques with new technologies;
- benchmarking and tracking progress quantitatively and qualitatively for different kinds of consultations; and
- resolving practical issues, such as the use of official languages or ensuring that participants remain respectful of one another while still speaking their minds.

This project will launch a series of e-consultations over the next year on topics of immediate interest to participating department(s). They will be aimed at developing new technologically-enabled approaches to consultation, raising awareness within the public policy community of the issues and opportunities they present, and promoting discussion of them.

Crossing Boundaries believes that, if governments and citizens are to benefit fully from the opportunities, such research must begin. Moreover, ***it should be led by a not-for-profit, non-partisan public policy organization*** with the capacity and expertise to analyze the process, provide a candid and unbiased assessment of the methodological and public policy issues it raises, and publish the results. We do not think these goals will be met by the private sector, acting on its own. We do believe that ***Crossing Boundaries is uniquely well-suited to lead such an initiative***, in partnership with government and the private sector.

Project Objectives

- Explore how new technologies can be used to enhance the capacity to engage “ordinary Canadians” and/or stakeholders in a deliberative discussion of key policy issues and thereby contribute to better policy development;
- Begin identifying, framing and exploring key methodological issues associated with this kind of dialogue and deliberation, including:
 - benchmarking key stages of the discussion
 - quantitative tracking of opinions
 - assessing and identifying qualitative influences on deliberation
 - difficulties around recruitment
- Identify the skills-sets and knowledge needed to use the tools effectively; and
- Build awareness across the broader public-policy community of the issues and best practices learned from this project through the production and distribution of a final report.

Project Rationale

Canadian governments have always used public consultation processes, ranging from town-halls and public hearings to referendums. They helped ensure that controversial decisions reflected the public values, priorities and opinion of the day. Nevertheless, until quite recently, policy development happened largely *inside* government. Governments may have consulted from time to time, but they rarely felt bound by what they heard. In those days, public officials were usually the only real experts in many policy areas. By-and-large, then, they talked among themselves, developed policy for the minister and then advised him on it. The culture was inward-looking, elitist, secretive, and top-down. As a result, they tended to doubt—if not dismiss—ideas that conflicted with their own view of a situation.

Over the last few decades, things have changed. Increasingly, policy-making is a public process, involving governments, stakeholders and citizens. The change has been brought on by at least two things.

First, while governments still reserve the right to make the final judgment, the public has become far more demanding. It is more informed and, as a result, less inclined to simply accept government decisions. Instead, it now expects the decisions to reflect the

consultations. The general view is that, if governments are there to serve the public, they should be transparent, accountable and responsive to it.

Second, the number of public advocacy organizations has exploded. Many are well resourced and highly articulate. They often employ experts whose full-time job is to try and change government policy. This new chorus of voices has become a major player in the public policy process. “Stakeholder consultations” are now an integral part of government policy-making. But for all that, they present government with a dilemma.

On the one hand, most advocacy groups claim to represent some sub-group of citizens—such as immigrants, single mothers, the business community or the homeless—and to be experts on the policies that respond to their needs. They insist that governments therefore have a special obligation to consult them on these issues.

On the other hand, it is difficult for governments to know how true their claims are. Public policy issues often rest on competing values, priorities or trade-offs. For example, if there is a budget surplus, should it be used to lower taxes, pay down the debt or develop a new child-care program? And if it should be spent on a child-care program, should it be one that commits to the creation of new day-care spaces or one that channels funds directly to parents and lets them decide how to use it?

Such questions will not be solved by an appeal to evidence or expertise. There may be no right or wrong answer. Rather, there is a choice to be made. In a democracy, we assume that, whoever is responsible for making the choice, it should reflect the views and interests of citizens, not elites. How do we know then that advocacy groups really speak for the people they claim to represent?

One way to test this is to use other consultation tools to connect directly with citizens, such as public opinion polling, surveys and focus groups. They can provide an important check on questionable positions and options, as well as a way of helping to legitimate good ones. Nevertheless, the suite of tools available for this purpose is less than perfect. Opinion polls and surveys are confined to people’s responses at a particular moment in time. But this can and does change quickly. Debate, exposure to the views of others, or new information—all can change how people think about an issue.

A more reliable test would overcome this weakness by incorporating *deliberation*. In other words, it would track the evolution of citizens’ views over time as they discuss them with others and encounter new information.

Focus groups take us some distance in this direction. They allow a more nuanced discussion in which participants can learn more about an issue. They can also interact with one another, exchange ideas, adjust their views and even make trade-offs on options. Not surprisingly, focus groups have become a staple for policy makers. But they too have a weakness. They usually involve only a small number of people. As a result, the findings are not very reliable.

Ideally, then, to overcome some of the limitations of traditional consultations processes, governments would have a way to engage large numbers of people that is methodologically rigorous, designed to produce an informed, deliberative discussion, and, of course, cost effective.

Project Leaders

Crossing Boundaries

The Crossing Boundaries National Council is a not-for-profit national forum whose mission is to foster the development of Canada as an information society through the transformation of government and governance. The Council helps Canadians and their governments understand and prepare for the Information Age by fostering debate and action on the special challenges and opportunities it poses for them. The Council is Co-Chaired by Rona Ambrose, Minister of the Environment, Government of Canada, and Dan Bader, Deputy Minister, Municipal Affairs, Government of Alberta. It is made up of about 40 members, including senior public servants and elected representatives from each of the 10 provinces and the federal government, as well as representatives from territorial and municipal governments and the Aboriginal community.

The Council pursues its mission by undertaking consultations and working group projects of different kinds. For a current list of Council initiatives please visit www.crossingboundaries.ca

SES Research

Since 1987, Canada's leading corporate, government and political decision-makers have trusted SES to conduct research and provide strategic advice on a full range of market challenges and public opinion issues. In addition to media polling and public opinion research, SES also specializes in public policy polling and consumer research. SES draws on a number of research tools to ensure relevant and comprehensive results, from telephone surveys and online research applications through to focus groups. Apart from its opinion research practice, SES has designed, led and implemented a number of public consultation initiatives on issues ranging from the privacy and access of health information through to public consultations on gas prices.

SES has been recognized by the CBC, The Globe and Mail, The Toronto Star and The Hill Times as Canada's most accurate pollster in the 2006 Federal Election. SES is the polling firm of record for CPAC, the Cable Public Affairs Channel and also the Osprey Media Group a chain of 51 newspapers in Canada. The firm is a member of the Marketing Research and Intelligence Association, the governing body for market and public opinion research in Canada. For more information on the firm's services and capabilities please visit www.sesresearch.com.

The Partnership

Since its inception, Crossing Boundaries has undertaken dozens of multi-stakeholder consultations, ranging from small focus group sessions to cross-country roundtables to

national conferences. It brings together politicians, public servants, the business community, the non-profit and voluntary sector and other members of the public-policy community on a wide variety of issues around governance and government transformation. In addition, it uses various tools for engaging citizens.

Over the years, Crossing Boundaries has pioneered new techniques in deliberative dialogue, such as juxtaposing the views of ordinary Canadians and those of experts. It has been involved in on-going research into the evolution of e-consultation tools, including internet consultations, video-conferencing, web-casting and the development of special e-tools for elected officials. As a result, we have a long-standing interest in the evolution and synthesis of traditional, face-to-face approaches to deliberation with new technology-enabled ones.

Since its beginnings, SES has established a national reputation as a leader in public opinion polling. In particular, its daily polls in the last federal elections set the standard for accuracy, coming within 0.1% of the final election results for the four major parties.

For the purposes of this project, the capacity and expertise of the two organizations are highly complementary. Although both are innovative leaders in their fields, they have focused on different aspects of public consultation. While SES specializes in *quantitative* opinion research through surveys, the Council has focused on *qualitative* research by engaging experts, stakeholders and citizens in dialogue and debate through face-to-face processes.

The SES Approach

Over the last decade, the shortcomings of traditional face-to-face consultations and the emergence of the Internet have led to the development of new online consultation services. But so far the tendency has been to approach consultation from the perspective of the early “online communities” that formed around technologies such as discussion boards, chat rooms, online surveys, listserv and blogs. In effect, these tools are seen as a platform for people to express their opinions or to exchange views in focus group-like settings. As a result, current approaches rarely approach anything that we could call *large-scale, methodologically rigorous deliberation* to support better policy development.

In part, this situation may be a result of the fact that online consultations have been provided mainly by companies with public opinion research experience who see the new tools as extending their existing capacity. In short, they simply incorporated them into existing services. While this has helped them overcome some of the weaknesses of face-to-face consultations, such as their elite focus, small scale and high cost, it has not produced a methodologically rigorous way to synthesize and analyze what happens when large numbers of participants interact with one another, experts and information. Where deliberation and analysis do happen, sponsors tend to rely too heavily on the opinions and perspectives of their consultation leaders.

This project will begin to develop and test new and genuinely deliberative approaches to e-consultation that will blend the experience of Crossing Boundaries and SES to promote debate, compromise and synthesis, while employing methodologically rigorous means to track progress. The final section in this proposal contains a synopsis of the project methodology.

The Methodology

STEP 1: Recruiting Participants

SES is able to use its telephone polling service to recruit consultation participants. Based on client needs this sample can range from representatives of a single group to a statistically representative sample of Canadians

STEP 2: Measuring Deliberative Dialogue Participant Perspectives

The online consultation component begins with an online poll measuring participant attitudes and perspectives on the consultation issues.

STEP 3: Informing Deliberative Dialogue Participants

Once the deliberative dialogue participants have completed the online poll component, they are provided with information about the issues being studied. A public policy expert will serve as the source of information and knowledge about the issues under consideration. The information can be presented in a range of formats, including text, sound and video and in a manner that identifies contrasting points of view, in order to challenge participants with the proposed trade-offs and choices. During this step, participants are asked to rate the content and these ratings become part of the research data.

STEP 4: Expert Driven Deliberative Dialogue

Once the target participants become informed on the issue, participants are then invited to interact with the policy expert tasked with driving the online dialogue. The expert driven dialogue is the spark which ignites participant-to-participant discussions. In this manner, participant interaction is encouraged and supported by domain specific knowledge and information. The dialogue component is powered by expert moderated blogs. Participants are asked to rate expert postings and comment on expert postings. Participants are also asked to rate participant comments and to comment on other participant's comments. The resulting quantitative and qualitative outputs are included in the research data for analysis.

STEP 5: Measuring the Deliberative Dialogue Outcomes

At the end of the dialogue process, we will post a final online exit poll as part of the process. This survey will be used to measure and track changes in participant attitudes and perspectives based on the deliberative dialogue process. The results of the exit poll are combined with the data output from the dialogue process and then analyzed by us in order to arrive at research-based insights into the perspectives of the persons consulted and how to move public opinion on complex issues.

STEP 6: Testing the Deliberative Dialogue Outcomes (optional)

Upon the completion of the deliberative dialogue process, we are able to conduct a telephone survey of a statistically relevant sample of Canadians to test and validate the insights generated from the online dialogue process. The outcome testing poll is used to confirm the results of the process.