Abstract

This paper outlines the innovative engagement process used to develop a Guide to Online Participation for New Zealand government agencies. The Guide was intended to improve opportunities for New Zealanders to engage in policy development and service design and delivery through ICT applications, within the context of the long term Development Goals for the New Zealand State Services. In an interesting process of self-reflection the development of the Guide itself forms the basis for one of three case studies of online participation in NZ agencies where the principles outlined in the Guide have been applied and tested. The case study concludes with some evaluative frameworks that have been developed as part of the ParticipatioNZ wiki, the online forum used to develop the Guide, and uses these to assess the effectiveness of the three online participation projects.

1. Introduction

The rapidly increasing use of social networking software, often referred to as Web 2.0, has led to considerable debate in the international literature about the potential role of these technologies to extend existing government consultative processes, and to a number of trial projects throughout the world. This debate has in turn raised questions about how to engage with citizens in this way, how to ensure that the process is fair and open, how it compares with existing consultative processes in terms of its reach and the value of contributions, and how to evaluate the use of these technologies within the framework of e-participation. This paper looks at the development of a Guide for government agencies to use when embarking on an e-participation process, how the Guide was itself developed as part of an engagement process within a diverse Community of Practice, and how the principles outlined in the Guide have been used to inform and evaluate a series of online participation projects. The paper therefore presents an interesting case study of self-reflection and evaluation in a diverse practitioner community focused on online participation within the New Zealand government.

1.1 The New Zealand government’s e-government mission

The Minister for State Services formally launched Enabling Transformation: A Strategy for E-government 2006 in November 2006. This updated version of the government’s E-government Strategy reflects the growing impact of a digital generation which has very different expectations of the way in which they interact with government. While Participation has continued to be a core component of the strategy, the 2006 version includes a new goal that emphasises enabling public participation with government, reflecting the growth of social networking on the WWW:

By 2020, people’s engagement with the government will have been transformed, as increasing and innovative use is made of the opportunities offered by network technologies. [1]

In 2005, the New Zealand State Services Commission, supported by the Government, identified a set of Development Goals for transforming State Services, which defined how the State Services will be configured and perform, while service outcomes were to be determined by the government of the day. The E-government strategy contributes to the overriding vision of a system of world-class professional State Services, serving the government of the day and meeting the needs of New Zealanders. The Development Goals that are particularly relevant to the E-government Participation project include Networked State Services, Coordinated State Services, Accessible State Services, and Trusted State Services.[2] The New Zealand
government’s Digital Strategy also provided a framework for the project. [3]

Following an early period of scoping international and local developments, the Participation Project team set out to develop guidance and a set of resources to inform online participation projects in New Zealand government agencies, through a process of active participation. The project had four main goals: policy development; building a community of practice; raising public awareness; and international exchange. It was to be managed by a series of principles in order to ‘practice what we preach,’ and set an example of good practice. The Guide would reflect core principles; incorporate diverse perspectives; be able to be adapted to different needs and purposes; be future proof; be subject to public consultation.

2. Key concepts from the Literature

Some general principles emerging in early attempts at online consultation are identified in a literature focused on e-participation, often led by governmental agencies as they explored the issues. The OECD’s 2001 Policy Brief Engaging Citizens in Policy-making highlights the role of ICTs as a ‘powerful tool’ for engaging citizens in policy-making, and identifies three levels of participation: information, consultation, active participation, although at this point in time they describe the latter two as being ‘in their infancy.’[4] Two years later, the 2003 Policy Brief Engaging Citizens Online for Better Policy-making notes that most examples of online engagement are at the ‘agenda-setting stage’ in terms of the policy process, and highlights the need to tailor the individual process to the policy-making context (i.e. national or local, or targeted at specific groups), and the need to integrate online and traditional methods for citizen engagement in policy-making. It identifies a set of tools appropriate for online participation at various stages of the policy making cycle, (from agenda-setting though to implementation and monitoring), within the earlier framework of information, consultation and participation. Thus engagement at the policy-formulation stage might include additional tools such as discussion forums, online citizen juries or e-community tools, while full participation would require e-petitions and e-referenda. [5]

The full report on which the policy brief is based outlines a number of major challenges facing countries and agencies embarking on online citizen engagement, and provides examples and case studies from a number of countries including New Zealand.

Analysing some of these early projects, Ann Macintosh identified three levels of participation, which correspond to the OECD model, and further define the activities within each:

- e-enabling, which encompasses accessibility and understanding (information);
- e-engaging, which requires consulting a wider audience to enable deeper contributions and support deliberative debate on policy issues (consultation); and
- e-empowering, providing opportunities for citizens to influence and participate in policy formulation and service design (participation).[6]

A report resulting from an Oxford Internet Institute workshop held with the UK Cabinet Office, Engaging with the Google Generation, highlights key issues confronting governments in the 21st century, as a result of the so-called Google revolution. The ways in which online decentralized social networks and user-produced content are bypassing traditionally powerful communication gatekeepers suggests that the status quo may no longer be a realistic option for engagements with the public. However, it is not yet clear what should be done, as citizens grasp the powerful new communicative empowerment opportunities afforded by the Internet. This is enabling Internet users to reconfigure their access to other people, information, services, technologies, including reshaping their relationships with government.

These developments are putting pressure on slower more deliberative governance processes. A prime challenge to 21st Century government in this environment is to keep risk-taking within manageable bounds, while innovating enough to ensure that successes outweigh any failures. For example joining the growing online mashup in effective and imaginative ways, some as simple as providing a Web link, could help government to forge fresh connections with citizens. [7, p9]

The report, highlighting several examples of effective online participation from around the world, makes several recommendations designed to address these observations, such as the new media to reach out to wherever citizens are active, including cyberspace, while at the same time avoiding oversimplifying the role of activities in cyberspace in addressing
problems that have real-world roots, such as social inclusion. [7]

The report further identifies trust as a key issue in government’s consultation with citizens, especially in the online environment of what the authors describe as deliberative e-democracy. Citizens have an expectation that their voice will be heard, even if “no promise can be made that that their view will change specific policy outcomes.” [7, p19] The key issue identified by the report is the need to allay suspicions about the motivations of government and politicians that online communication is dominated by an existing personal or political agenda. Safeguards for citizens (such as data protection and privacy laws, and timely and relevant responses to online communications) are seen as the best way to retain trust. However, the issue of how and where to include public engagement in the policy making process is a vexed one; engagement, especially in the online environment, can lead to unrealisable public expectations, as Parkinson noted, leaving a considerable gap between the ‘deliberative ideal’ and ‘deliberative practice.’ Parkinson argues that the concept of deliberative democracy as based on two principles: ‘reasoning between people, . . . rather than bargaining between two competing interests’, and the giving, weighing, acceptance or rejection of reasons is a public act, as opposed to the purely private act of voting.” [8, p379]

3. Key concepts informing online participation within the New Zealand government

From their exploration of the literature, and in the context of the Development Goals for the State Services, the E-government strategy, and the Digital Strategy outlined above, the project team identified a number of key issues that would shape the project. These included:

- to use the technology to support the principles of participation that they had identified in the literature in managing the project;
- to use a team with a broad skill-set and perspectives;
- to provide feedback to citizens who volunteer their views as a means of developing trust among participants, and
to reflect best practice in active participation;
- to focus on dialogue (setting the agenda, defining the problem), rather than debate (consideration of an issue or an argument presented for this purpose);
- to identify how trust is to be maintained in the online consultation environment as a two-way process between citizens and government.

These then became identified as critical success factors as the project progressed, and became core principles of the Participation 2.0 paradigm that developed as the underlying model.

Questions to which they were seeking answers throughout the process, and in evaluating the project (and the associated case studies) focused on where participation, and, in particular, online participation fits within the policy-making process, whether there is a role for public involvement at the policy development phase, as well as later in the policy-making and service design process, and what this means for the legislative process.

4. Development of the Participation Project as an exemplar of online participation

From the beginning, because of the central focus on exploration of the process, and the way in which key principles were applied to the process throughout the project, the project became a constantly self-reflecting enterprise. A supportive Community of Practice (CoP) was initiated in 2006 through the project manager’s existing networks and comprised members of the wider team within the State Services Commission, interested parties from other public sector agencies, academics, civil society groups and IT professionals as well as a broader international community. The primary role of the CoP was to share knowledge, and to help create a Guide to Online Participation for use by NZ agencies.

The project team identified functions for technology that would support the CoP, along with the traditional methods of participation. A core tool developed for the CoP was (is) an online wiki, the ParticipatioNZ wiki. This wiki is used to foster ‘dialogue’ about key issues, and to enable CoP members to collaborate, view and create content. The wiki is used as a repository of resources, which includes workshop materials, presentations, case studies, discussion boards, relevant policy

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1 The core team throughout much of the Guide development phase comprised Laura Sommer, David Hume, and Joanne Caddy.
and principles, the Guide itself, a glossary, relevant articles, and links to similar resources or reports of NGOs and other governments. It is a multi-dimensional online environment which employs deep linking navigation, and tag clouds for discovery and retrieval. Help screens and video are used to help users become accustomed to the technology. The number of CoP members signed on to the wiki has grown from an initial 100 members to 300 by the end of 2007.

As content is developed on the wiki, largely by members of the core team, and associates, it is in draft form, (referred to by the team as ‘drafting naked’) available for edit and comment, all contributions being available as ‘recent changes’ or archived discussions. The wiki is only available to subscribed members of the CoP, (i.e. password protected) but any member can invite a colleague to join, based on the social networking concept. This provides an environment of trust, where members can interact on the understanding that their opinions are not committing their organisation to policy positions, and requires limited moderation compared with open lists.

Figure 1. Overview of the Guide to Participation [9]

4.1 The Guide to Online Participation

The Guide itself (see Fig 1) is also a fully developed online document, embedded in the wiki, and designed to exploit the capabilities of the medium. Its various sections and supporting resources are hyperlinked to each other, so that a number of pathways through the material, depending on the user’s interest and expertise, are possible. This approach allows the user to take a ‘snapshot’ of each section or engage with the ‘full story.’

Resources include an explanation of tools that can be used by developers (e.g. tag clouds, RSS feeds, SMS and email alerts, blogs and wikis), case studies and links to some early innovations, and associated links to other online resources on the topic. The Guide is also available as a pdf file, from the State Services Commission’s E-govt web site (www.e.govt.nz) so that it is widely available within New Zealand and further abroad, and easily discoverable through search engines.

Although the current version of the Guide is available in pdf format, the fluid nature of the document, and the extensive use of hyperlinked cross referencing within the wiki and the Guide, to internal and external resources, raises a number of issues about the management of textual materials in three dimensions. The project team developed a technique of ‘scraping content’ periodically to create a version at a particular point in time, to forward to participants unable for some reason to access hyperlinked files, and to archive content to meet government requirements for record-keeping, under the Public Records Act 2005.

The core principles, and recommendations for managing and evaluating the online participation process were developed with the Community of Practice, informed by the project team’s extensive knowledge and user research, and validated by international experts. The principles outlined include:
**Clarity.** Be clear. Be open and transparent about the objectives, limits, resources and potential impacts of online participation.

**Respect.** Show respect for the contributions, perspectives, values and prerogatives of people, stakeholders, elected representatives and public servants.

**Confidence and commitment.** Build confidence as a basis for commitment. Online participation is a new practice for people, stakeholders, elected representatives and public servants. Give it time, prove its worth.

**Creativity.** Be creative. New tools mean new approaches. Success hinges on innovation.

**Inclusion.** Be inclusive. Go to where people are. Make every effort to be accessible and connect with all relevant communities, online and offline.

**Accountability.** Be accountable. Online participation is a multi-stakeholder process where everyone is accountable.

**Achievement.** Make a difference. Strive for, build on and celebrate achievements in using online participation as a means for people, government, communities and businesses to achieve their goals. [9]

Each of these is explained in more detail in ‘The Full Story.’ Under Clarity, for example, further advice is given about the need to explain to participants what the issues are, how the process works, the role played by government (as the instigator, facilitator or observer of public participation), how to make an impact on the process, who will make the final decision, and how they will inform participants about the outcomes. The principles also suggest that participants should be made aware that disagreement is natural, but should also be cordial, and of the time, energy and resources needed to participate effectively. Under Accountability, the principles emphasise the need to be accountable for the use of public funds in undertaking online participation, to ensure that people's time has been well used and recognized, and to ensure that participants are given feedback on decisions made.

Guidance on implementation covers issues such as reaching potential participants, ensuring that there is regular feedback to participants on the process, their part in it, and the outcomes of the consultation, and how to generate discussion. The section on managing participation provides advice on the wide range of skills needed in the project team, how to choose a technology platform and support users, how to facilitate online discussion, manage timelines, and what resources are needed for a project of this kind. The section on managing risk covers issues such as how to deal with objectionable material, the rules of engagement for civil servants, how to avoid predetermining the outcome, and managing criticism and dissent in the process of dialogue. The need for full reporting of the discussion, archiving of content, some form of metadata for searchability of content, and the need for decisions about where the final version is to be held are all emphasized. Links to case studies of other trials of online participation in the New Zealand government, and links to reports of trials in other countries are included in the Guide. The case studies include the Online Participation project itself, providing a mirror of the Principles and Management guidelines in action, as the Community of Practice and the Participation Project team developed them.

### 4.2 Some general findings

The development of guidelines for online participation, within a defined Community of Practice, enabled a trusted environment to be maintained without difficulty. Other issues, identified as critical success factors, emerged through the case studies reported on the wiki but not available as part of the Guide. The case studies highlight issues related to engagement, and the operation of consultation within agencies. For example, care taken in framing the issues emerged as a key issue—agencies found that developing compelling content (whether through carefully framed questions, use of a range of technologies, or attractive graphics), was a key issue in getting people involved, stimulating discussion, and gaining trust. Agencies also found that making people aware of the online opportunity, and gaining good representation across the community was a key issue.

Trust is also built through feedback, and ensuring the feedback loop is complete, a principle which emerged as a critical component of the participation process. For example, participants in many of the projects showed considerable interest in how their input would be used, and wanted specific feedback on this in order to have confidence in the process. An analysis of successful operational patterns showed that some organisational work patterns may well need to change as a result of incorporating online participation into their operations, and some agencies needed encouragement in incorporating technologies
such as RSS feeds into their workflows. In addition, it was found that while some issues when put forward for public discussion can attract considerable negative comment at the outset, after this has abated, a more useful dialogue can emerge.

Getting buy-in from senior managers in the public service was also a critical success factor that entailed overtly managing risks perceived by senior managers, specifically, ensuring that online engagement does not lead to direct challenges to public statements made by senior leadership, and keeping public servants safe from personal attacks. Many of the lessons learned from these case studies are incorporated into the final Principles of the Guide, and form part of the ParticipatioNZ case study itself. The Guide itself is seen as always being in beta version, part of an evolutionary process, evolving as more is leaned about online participation by the project team and the Community of Practice.

5. Case studies

There are four case studies available as part of the Guide to Online Participation, and therefore available in the public domain through the New Zealand e-Government web site: Families Commission; The Couch Case Study; Toi te Taiao: the Bioethics Council Case Study; SafeAs! Road safety Stakeholder Engagement Case Study; and the State Services Commission: Online Participation Project Case Study. Other case studies which are only available at present to the CoP through the ParticipatioNZ wiki, include the All of Government Portal Participation Page, the Police Wiki, the Ministry of Economic Development Business Consultation pages, and the Beehive Website. The ParticipatioNZ wiki is discussed throughout this paper. Toi te Taiaro: the Bioethics Council Case Study and the Police Act Wiki are discussed further here as exemplars of the Guide, and its principles in action.

5.1 Toi te Taiaro: the Bioethics Council Case Study

The Bioethics Council is an advisory body to the New Zealand government and works to engage New Zealanders in dialogue about the cultural, ethical and spiritual aspects of biotechnology. It has adopted a multi-party, multi-stakeholder approach to this dialogue instead of traditional government consultation processes, in order to reflect the complexity of the issues at stake, and to ensure the focus is on dialogue and discussion, or ‘conversation’ rather than debate. Issues on which the Council has attempted to inform and engage with New Zealanders to date include nanotechnology, new organisms, and human assisted reproduction, and it has run major dialogue processes on human gene modification, human genes in animals, animal genes in humans, and human embryo research.

In late 2007 it opened its most recent dialogue, ‘Who gets born: pre-birth genetic testing’. The case study report explains that the Bioethics Council “understands dialogue as a conversation—rather than a debate—in which people who have different beliefs and perspectives seek to develop mutual understanding. A typical result from a dialogue process includes:

• softening of stereotypes
• development of more trusting relationships
• fresh perspectives
• new possibilities for interaction. [10]

The dialogue concerning pre-birth testing was designed to go through a staged process, Stage one, focused on framing the issue, had as its goal to develop a problem statement that would enable people to come to grips with the core elements of the problem in a non-political way, intended to prevent hardened positions developing in the public discussion phase. Stage two, public deliberation, involved a large and diverse group of participants (about 100) who are required to go through a workbook on the issues as individuals, and a tutorial about the rules of engagement before being assigned to moderated groups for further discussion. Within these groups, participants were encouraged to make daily posts to the discussion (within a stated time frame), and asked to address specific issues. Comments were strictly moderated, and daily summaries of the discussion posted. A final phase of national face-to-face discussion would highlight the key issues and decisions made by participants to be reported in the final report.

The final report:
will link transparently to people's input and include an evaluation of the process. Moreover, to help the report have impact with decision makers -- the Council is expressly setting up its process to appeal to them -- the final outputs will be developed to look like 'policy' rather than 'points of view'.

The Council also hopes to generate media attention that will encourage a response from decision makers. [10]


In the case study the Council notes that there has been no formal response to date from government to any of its reports, observing that there is a lack of clarity about what its input to policy-making should be, and that the work of the Council does not fit well with New Zealand’s current ‘governance framework’. Its reflection on its online participation process concludes that the task require a professional team with a mix of skills including subject experts, facilitators, marketers, communicators and writers; that the issues must be understandable (some of the issues the Bioethics Council presents to citizens are extremely complex); that people tend to approach such issues with hardened positions, and that it takes some time for these to soften; and that it is difficult to make impact on decision-makers or even provide feedback on the impact of the dialogue.

5.2 The Police Act Wiki

The New Zealand Police started a broad consultation process in 2005 to engage the public in a discussion about the future of policing in New Zealand, which would involve a re-drafting of the 1958 Police Act and related regulations. As part of this process, a wiki was developed in September 2007 to provide some form of online participation to be incorporated with input from a number of other forums, and was seen as a way of starting “a conversation with all New Zealanders about the policing they want and expect in the 21st century.” Particular challenges it was hoped the online participation process would address were to generate interest in the review and engage hard to reach communities, such as youth, Maori and Pacific Peoples, and New Zealanders overseas, aligning traditional and non-traditional consultation channels with a constrained budget.

Wiki software was preferred to other Web 2.0 technologies such as YouTube and MySpace, as both practical and affordable, but having gravitas, as suited to the subject matter, and being a marketable option. Following approval from both the Minister of Police and the Commissioner of Police, the wiki was established as a forum available only during working hours to allow for moderation (carried out after posting to avoid charges of censorship), allowing anonymous posts, and populated with some basic content—the original Police Act 1958 Act, the Police Regulations 1992, and an outline of the changes suggested by the Police Act Review team. The wiki is still available as a document of record at: http://wiki.policeact.govt.nz/.

Following a press release to launch the wiki, the story rapidly spread throughout the news media globally, appearing on the BBC web site, and started attracting considerable attention. The small team managing it, and the IT support team were kept busy although most users were responsible and self-moderating, and attempts to link the site to porn sites were defeated. The project team, reporting to the CoP lunchtime forum on April 5 2008, noted that the wiki attracted hundreds of comments and edits, had brought a lot of new ideas, refined existing ideas, and drew international and expatriate thinking into the review process.[11] Not all contributions were entirely serious, the Yum Yum Teddy Bear Strike Force and the dark eye of Sauron also featured in posts.

Although the project team considered the wiki a very empowering channel for the general public, there was a great deal of concern expressed in the ‘Establishment’ about how a wiki might affect traditional processes for policy development, and whether it might create a new digital divide, disempowering those not able or willing to participate in a wiki. The team considered that the wiki had met expectations, within the communications strategy and consultation ethics defined for the Police Act review, raising the profile of the review, enhancing the consultation process, generally enhancing Police credibility, and generating “a firmer and fuller base of ideas, and consensus for the new legislation.” [11]

The case study on the Police wiki, currently in draft form and only available to the CoP for comment at this stage, applies the principles and the Guidelines to evaluate the process, identifying the process as one of Active participation (OECD, 2001), a citizen-centred input to policy making, with respect for participants shown in the process, and good feedback available (especially in the archived wiki remaining available.)
6. Evaluation

Within the resources of the ParticipatioNZ wiki, and in the Principles articulated in the Guide to Online Participation there are several frameworks that could be used to evaluate the projects outlined above, and the participative processes that they report. In addition the document Evaluating the ParticipatioNZ wiki sets out a series of a evaluation questions that the project team has posed:

- What are the characteristics of the wiki and how is it working?
- Does the wiki generate new ideas and/or information and/or perspectives for the guide to online participation?
- Does the wiki help to fuel a resource base on online participation?
- How do members participate in the wiki?
- What are members' perceptions of their own benefit and impact?
- What does the wiki cost to design and run?
- How has the Project Team benefited from using the wiki?

In an attempt to answer these questions the paper provides some initial data from two months after the launch which shows that of the 179 subscribed members of the CoP at that time, only 58 (32%) had contributed user pages with content, and only 32 (18%) could be considered active users. However, the ParticipatioNZ wiki Case Study reports that a survey of participants in the first two weeks after the launch concluded that members felt they got value out of their membership of the group, even if they were not contributing content at that time. A year later, the contribution of content, and leadership of discussion remains with the core team. As the Case Study notes: “typically just 1 percent of users will contribute 90 percent of your content. About 10-20 percent will contribute occasionally.” [12]

The model for evaluation posted on the wiki for comment highlights the need for an evaluation framework to be commenced early in the process, and be continuous throughout its life, to be multifaceted and participatory (encompassing facts, values and perspectives), be based on the OECD spectrum of Information, Consultation and Participation, be formative (rather than summative), and be focused at programme level. An alternative model for evaluating ‘deliberative democracy’ projects is also proposed on the site, which sets of the following criteria:

- **inclusion** of all relevant stakeholder views, values, and interests
- extensive dialogue between and among evaluators and stakeholders so they understand one another thoroughly
- deliberation with and by all parties to reach conclusions

Amongst all these choices, little consensus has yet emerged, but common principles can be identified.

Using the principles of the Guide to examine the three projects outlined here, along with the two additional principles of deliberative democracy, dialogue and deliberation (inclusion is already listed), each of the projects is evaluated on a score of 1-3 where 1=partial achievement, 2=achieves well, and 3= excels.

| Table 1. Applying evaluative criteria to the 3 case studies |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Criterion**   | **ParticipatioNZ wiki** | **Bioethics Council** | **Police wiki** |
| Clarity         | 3               | 2               | 3               |
| Respect         | 3               | 3               | 3               |
| Confidence/commitment | 3       | 2               | 3               |
| Creativity      | 2               | 2               | 2               |
| Inclusion       | 1               | 2               | 3               |
| Accountability  | 2               | 3               | 3               |
| Achievement     | 2               | 1               | 3               |
| Dialogue        | 1               | 3               | 1               |
| Deliberation    | 2               | 3               | 1               |

Where the ParticipatioNZ wiki scores more highly on its openness, and direct use of participant’s contribution to policy, it has not achieved as well in extending its reach, or encouraging dialogue outside a small team. The Bioethics Council has excellent respectful
procedures for participants, but has not succeeded in converting their contributions into policy. The Police Wiki by contrast demonstrates a clear pathway through to policy making but has generated interactive dialogue less successfully.

However, in making this assessment it is important to consider what is being evaluated here. A key factor of participation is the use of multiple channels. The ParticipatioNZ wiki was, and had to be, one of several channels used for active participation This was also true of the Police Act Wiki, which was part of a suite of tools/channels used to engage public opinion. Much of the input to the wiki came via many bilateral meetings, emails, workshops, and international discussions which project members then entered directly into the wiki. It became clear through the ParticipatioNZ project community members want to use multiple channels, not just rely on one online tool for deliberation. One of the primary roles of the wiki, therefore, is a space to capture the content from those various engagements. This aspect of participation needs to be considered in any evaluation model.

To answer the questions posed by the ParticipatioNZ Wiki project team, the wiki has become an invaluable multi-dimensional resource for members of the Community of Practice, which generates ideas and discussion amongst the team (rather than the wider CoP community, although they participate enthusiastically in the lunchtime forums), but significantly keeps members of the CoP informed, both on emerging issues in online participation, and on government policy on these. Its costs, as with the management of the Police wiki are primarily staff time and involvement, but its ongoing nature means that these represent a long-term commitment that must be justified by the benefits.

7. Conclusion

The three projects have demonstrated therefore that they are making a contribution to the government consultation process in an age when citizens expectations of how they will communicate with government are undoubtedly impacted by the new social networking technologies. We are learning through the projects undertaken so far what these technologies can add to the participation process, and what their limitations are. We can see that they contribute significantly in providing information and that as trust and commitment to the process is built up, will contribute equally to participation and consultation processes. The projects outlined here can already claim to be moving beyond engagement to e-empowerment even if they have not yet fully achieved that.

It has also been shown that they can work well within existing government guidelines for the management of information (archiving and record-keeping procedures are well observed) and that they allow an appropriate role for government servants to participate in policy making debate with citizens - a major contributor to building trust between citizens and government. They have shown that social networking software, carefully moderated, can produce high level dialogue concerning complex issues, and that in some cases this can make an evident contribution to policy. Where they display shortcomings, such as limited engagement of the wider community, or reluctance of policy makers to accept the online contribution), this may be largely due to the wider processes they are part of. The question of which stage of the policy making process is best suited to online consultation—policy framing, or policy making, is, as Parkinson noted, a matter of the gap between deliberative practice and the deliberative ideal. This will be a matter for debate, on and offline, for a long time to come.

8. References

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