

Open or closed? An assessment of how blogs can contribute to policy making.

Abstract

This paper analyses the processes and outcomes of communication by two Australian government departments that used blogs to consult with citizens on a policy that was under development: Broadband, Communication and the Digital Economy (DBCDE) and Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). The researcher also interviewed managers of the blog process of both departments to secure their feedback. The findings indicate that closed community blogs create excellent conditions for rich policy input, while open blogs (available to all citizens) provide less specific and less useable policy input. This is partially because public blogs are easily skewed off topic by participants who wish to dictate a particular view or as a result of ‘the vibe’ in the public sphere, affected by media and other people’s commentary that can set the agenda for discussion. Nevertheless, open blogs can provide government with a litmus test of the immediate concerns of active members of the public.

Do blogs improve citizen engagement with government policy?

This study focuses on the use of blogs to allow large numbers of diverse and geographically dispersed members of the public to contribute to discussions on government decision making. Blogs are cost and time effective; however, questions remain as to whether their contributions improve the outcome of government policy (Iandoli et al.: 2009). This study explores the processes undertaken by two Australian federal government departments and aims to contribute to discussion to improve policy consultation opportunities with citizens. The views of the government department managers, who established the structure and processes for maintaining the trials, are analysed alongside blog posts and media commentary

Conceptualising pathways for government and citizen exchange

The management of a consultative process between government and citizens is important for democracy, however expectations about; who speaks, who listens and what happens to commentary between parties will differ (Coudry: 2010). This study is a case in point. While it is not possible to meet the needs of all parties, engaging with society requires an open process that accepts that a range of responses will be provided and they need to be managed (Waters et al.: 2009; Gibson et al.: 2008; Dickert and Sugarman: 2005; Bohman: 2003). Equally the management of the process to handle feedback, including rogue and negative comments, provides a challenge for any organisation open to public consultation. The structure of the process must accommodate differing expectations and conversations, especially those that are at cross-purposes between participants and organisation (Bruns and Wilson: 2010). Moreover an organisation's culture will influence how it manages the exchange, be it conservative or innovative (Boulding: 1956). Attributes of innovation align with an open system willing to consider alternative perspectives from citizens as they seek

out change, whereas a conservative culture will observe a hierarchical process that more tightly manages feedback from citizens, especially feedback that challenges their views (Broom: 2009; Clegg et al.: 2011). This study analyses data from two government departments; parallels can be drawn between their culture of innovation and digital economy and early childhood education as conservative (Clegg et al.: 2011).

The organisational engagement process reflects the changing nature of citizen participation and increased modes of engagement, of which blogs are one (Bohman: 2003; Lyons: 2009). Blogs have improved access to wider audiences and provide a good tool to capture citizen comments (Couldry: 2007), particularly on policy, a key driver for government's use of Web 2.0 blogs (Houghton and Burgess: 2006; Couldry et al.: 2007; Macnamara: 2010). The possibility for improved access to government policy, using blogs, is a key objective for democratic processes (Flew: 2008). However the blog space is noisy and can be strategically manipulated to influence the debate by coalitions representing a position on the public agenda (Bruns and Wilson: 2010). Klein, argues that "dysfunctional argumentation" and "hidden consensus" are some of the problems for online discussion (2007). While many voices are captured, often only the powerful or persistent are heard, and a structure to manage the comments to minimise the effect is needed. Bohman, (2003) and Bruns and Wilson (2010) agree, it is a challenging environment for capturing focused citizen comment on a specific topic.

Using Communities of Interest (CoI) framework to connect citizens who share an interest regardless of intellectual, demographic or psychographic positions (Fischer: 2009), compliments the physical access eradicated when using blogs and allows communities who are actively engaged in an issue to come together and creatively problem solve (Boler: 2008).

A deficit of this process is the opportunity for broader engagement beyond those connected by the issue however the framework appears to offer much for on-topic discussion despite running contrary to ideals of democracy (Keane:1998; Held: 2006) and open systems (Boulding: 1956) of engagement. CoI framework connects two fields in new ways to contribute to a focussed discussion of the issue because the knowledge people bring is superior.

The method of capturing feedback from citizens is unique to each situation and an online focus needs to complement rather than replace traditional forms of consultation (ACMA: 2008). This study uses the term 'citizen' as the party of focus for communication about government policy process, and 'publics' is used to indicate groups of citizens who share views about the policy, regardless of whether they are aware of each other prior to going online or not (Grunig: 1983 in Heath: 2005). Defining publics by their position or engagement with an issue requires the management of multi-channelled communication for effective engagement, because publics and their media are diverse (Waters et al.: 2009; Gibson et al.: 2008; Dickert and Sugarman: 2005; Bohman: 2003). However, research on the engagement potential across diverse publics suggests the process can be improved by using online communication methods, particularly blogs, as they are more accessible (Houghton and Burgess: 2006; Macnamara: 2010). Given the diversity of publics that make up Australia, the content format be it translated into specific languages, converted to speech for the deaf and hearing impaired and enlarged for people with reduced sight (Australian Human Rights Commission: 2010) needs consideration. Access to the communication is also improved using blogs as it can occur at a time suited to the participant over 24 hours, or provided at an accessible place for those who might be physically disabled. The conversational tone of voice within online exchanges has been described as an enabling factor in building trusting

relationships and contributing to a blog's credibility (Sweetser et al.: 2007; Fursdon and James: 2010), again enhancing engagement possibilities.

Despite the blog offering greater accessibility, it requires promotion within communities to improve engagement potential. Media play an important role in increasing awareness and promoting participation possibilities; however their reporting focus on a controversial angle is likely to steer debate to the more sensational aspects of the policy. Consequently the core issues important for informed consultation on the policy are ignored suggesting the motives of bloggers who are circulating the story may differ from those who seek feedback on a policy document. While the media's role is key in promoting engagement, it has the potential to set the agenda and influence the focus of future debates (McCombs and Shaw: 1972; Kiouisis and McCombs: 2004). Therefore, the use of alternative methodologies to capture comment on a topic may be required and closed blogs may be an alternative.

Methodology

A qualitative study based on in-depth interviews, supported by content analysis of websites and documents including relevant reports and strategies, was conducted during the period August 2008 to March 2009. Purposive sampling was used initially, as the study focussed on trial online consultation sites, supported by snowball sampling by referral of public servants involved in the formal trials. The research commenced with in-depth discussions with senior officers in the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO), the agency responsible for e-government and online consultation, and progressed through in-depth interviews with senior officials responsible for online public consultation. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face on site in the organisations' offices while some were

conducted via telephone. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analysed by content to isolate themes that emerged from the data, using the subject's own words (Bailey: 1982 and Walker: 1994). The themes of idiographic data (Reinard: 1994) that arose were the result of collapsing categories of manifest and latent content (Minichiello: 1990) as a response to the researcher's questions.

The researcher asked: how the department conducted their online public consultation trial? What were their experiences? What has been learned?

The research did not explore the experiences of participants beyond those who posted comments on the Department of Broadband, Communication and Digital Economy (DBCDE) blog consultation because of access. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) used a blog system that required registration for participation and it was not accessible after the consultation period had closed. Comments about this blog are only provided by the department managers. A focus on the experiences of participants is raised as an important area for future research (Gibson et al.: 2008; Macnamara et al.: 2009).

Case study: government trials blogs to capture feedback from citizens

In this study, managers from the Department of Broadband, Communication and Digital Economy (DBCDE) and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) provided insight of their first experiences using blogs to capture feedback from citizens on a policy. The DBCDE and DEEWR blogs were part of a larger consultation program that sought feedback from citizens about government policy. The blogs aimed to extend engagement opportunities in a cost effective way for people who were connected and wanted to comment on policy. The structures and processes each manager

used differed, partly as a result of feedback from the first consultation trial (DBCDE) and also due to variations in the culture of online engagement.

The DBCDE blog

In December 2008, the DBCDE was the first to trial Web 2.0, 'giving online citizenry a chance to interact with bureaucracy and make contributions to an area of government policy review' (Tanner: July 2008). A mix of workshops, a forum chaired by the minister, a blog and draft paper, 'Australia's digital economy: future directions' (Commonwealth of Australia, DBCDE: 2009), aimed to capture comment from citizens on the policy. The trial used blogging because it is 'one of the key communication platforms of the digital economy and aimed to encourage discussion' on the draft paper (DBCDE blog, 2008). The blog was accessible from 8 to 24 December 2008, and received over 1500 comments.

The blog began with a series of postings by the minister that aimed to encourage citizens to discuss the 'Australia's digital economy: future directions' paper. The majority of posts by members of the public that related to the paper discussed the importance of access for all homes and businesses, bandwidth, Telstra's monopoly and costs. However, most of the discussion was focused on an announcement by the minister proposing legislation to filter the internet, which was not a topic covered in the paper. The blog was available to anyone who wanted to comment and participants were not required to have read the paper under review. The consultation became a tool for digitally savvy bloggers to send a message to the government to oppose internet filtering and the blog became dominated by those with knowledge of the issues around the digital economy. A DBCDE interviewee stated that 'it was fair to say online communities totally hijacked the debate to focus on internet filtering'.

The active online communities opposed to internet filtering strategically used their connections between stakeholders and activist groups to extend the debate, cross-posting concerns about internet filtering and expanding engagement potential. GetUp an online activist group, posted the DBCDE blog link on their website and encouraged participants to visit the link to comment on internet filtering. ‘The DBCDE blog was bombarded with postings,’ according to a DBCDE interviewee. The result was that activists used the power of social media, via the blog, to disseminate information across their networks and gain media attention. The blog format gave citizens the opportunity to post their opinions and it created a protocol challenge for the government department, which were only able to respond to feedback on their policy document. They were not able to respond to comments arising from the minister’s announcement on internet filtering. This became a focus of media attention. Discussion about internet filtering gained momentum across multiple media platforms, and a popular story arose linking internet filtering to issues of censorship, highlighting the DBCDE blog and the absence of response to this issue as case in point. The DBCDE found that their blog had become the primary outlet to voice concern about internet filtering, such as, ‘this form of censorship will only hold back progress in the digital economy’ (posted by Tee Carter, 24.12.08). Another post concurred, ‘I thought the very idea of a democratic governing body was to represent the views of the population ... what is basically transpiring here is a “we know what’s best for you, so sit down and take your medicine” approach to leadership’ (posted by Josh, 24.12.08). Although the posts connected to the central theme, they did not provide specific feedback on the policy under review. Consequently, the blog consultation was skewed and the ability to gain feedback on the policy document diminished. However, the posts did provide a litmus test for current thinking on the subject within its active communities, an essential ingredient for democracy and civil society.

Further, participants felt they were not listened to because no one responded to the internet filtering comments until two days before the trial finished. A manager of the DBCDE blog expressed frustration saying, ‘we wanted to say, we see and hear your feedback ... bloggers were saying ... are you listening?’ Engagement with the blog could not be managed and the lack of response by the government to posts about internet filtering reflected poorly on it particularly because they were the department charged with leading the government on digital policy. The government needed protocols to manage the process when off-topic comments were posted; it was unable to control the communication tool. It was the new frontier and a challenge for government which is bound by specific protocols for responding to citizens. A DBCDE manager said, ‘there are no norms, it is being called glogging, Wikipedia doesn’t even have a definition’. The open system that promised transparent engagement was unable to deliver because the blog, that was open to all, lacked engagement protocol tools.

The Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations blog

The second government trial of blog-based consultation was the DEEWR, which sought feedback on the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), a reform agenda for early childhood education and care. Their process was part of a broader national consultation that included face-to-face public consultations, focus groups, two national symposiums, case study trials across 28 sites within Australia and an online forum (blog). The blog trial ran for approximately six weeks from March to May, 2009. Resources were translated into 20 languages to improve access to the draft policy document from diverse communities. Once feedback was provided on the document, ‘*BELONGING, BEING AND BECOMING: THE EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK*,’ (Commonwealth of Australia, DEEWR: 2009),

the DEEWR published a revised version. The online blog required participants to register prior to access, because the DEEWR wanted a closed blog for the EYLF that was ‘only open to early childhood educators who could really add value’ (DEEWR interviewee). The DEEWR emphasised that they wanted to know who participated in the forum because it was, ‘about a curriculum framework not an opinion on policy’ (DEEWR interviewee). The DBCDE open blog set-up affected the way the DEEWR ran their trial. The blog structure only allowed early childhood educators and interested individuals who were registered to observe discussion or participate in conversation.

Nine hundred and thirty three people registered to join the DEEWR blog through an anonymous numbering process. Participants were asked a series of questions about their service, including its name, their role, qualifications and number of years’ experience they held. The questions allowed the DEEWR to draw conclusions about who was engaging and observing the consultation without identifying people. The DEEWR wanted the blog communication to meet the needs of early childhood workers with IT and education skills that ranged significantly, and post-consultation research found that although some participants had university degrees or TAFE certificates, 50 per cent were unqualified. However, ‘most comments were coming from the upper education level’, according to a DEEWR interviewee. Conclusions about the level of ease of the new process became a focus as parallels appeared to be drawn between education and technological access. A DEEWR interview commented, ‘we knew they weren’t a field with IT on their desk, that go to websites for information for their work ... they are very hands-on workers.’ Working hours made consulting in the usual face-to-face format almost impossible for many, and so the blog methodology aimed to allow for a level of flexibility that the DEEWR hoped would be empowering.

Of the participants who had access and wanted to engage with the trial, many downloaded the EYLF to trial in their own service and 10 to 15 per cent commented on it via the blog. A DEEWR interviewee said, ‘lots of qualified directors commented ... we had many visitors but only 10 to 15 per cent [of these] wrote’. This suggests that the majority of participants either only viewed comments or downloaded the policy and communicated their comments via other channels or not at all. Even though the percentage of contributors was low, the consultation opened up opportunities for users to connect with the Department. ‘The consultation provided the means to capture views from all those other people who wanted to be involved right across the country in trials but couldn’t because of costs,’ a DEEWR interviewee said. It improved feedback from people from remote communities, such as the Kimberley, who had limited access to previous face-to-face consultations because of prohibitive costs. A DEEWR interviewee found bringing people together improved communication among colleagues and supported workers who may have been the only senior person in their field in the area: ‘It was a space for them to bounce ideas off each other.’ Participants found they were able to set-up networks for ongoing relationships, and some commented that there was a positive sense of being connected, ‘and having a means to talk to one another’. An interviewee said there were times when she went online to respond to a question and someone else had already responded. ‘The field matured with the tool ... people in small country towns may not have another person to chat with about these issues, [the blog] brought people together to support workers.’ Participants had the opportunity to bridge gaps of information, status, distance and education in a unique way if they chose to take part.

The blog set-up allowed for a two-day response turnaround from the DEEWR, although this was not implemented because, ‘it became a conversation between the registered participants

rather than a conversation with us ... it was quite fluid in that we left it to the field to comment', an interviewee said. A benefit was that 'we were providing them with a means for communicating back directly with government, not through a conduit or third party ... they seem to feel very good about that. It actually supported our trial consultation.'

The collaborative focus appears to be a result of the set-up process. Because it was a closed blog (participants needed to register), an assumed level of interest with the topic made collaboration easier to achieve. The registration process eliminated rogue comments from people who had no investment in the issue being discussed or from those with alternative agendas. The closed blog process used by the DEEWR represents a Community of Interest (CoI) and a Community of Practice (CoP), who were able to creatively problem solve because they shared a level of knowledge and commitment to the issue (Fischer: 2009; Wenger: 1998). This is in contrast to the DCBDE blog, which was open to all, so that bloggers did not necessarily share knowledge on a topic or a level of commitment, although many did share a position with active publics opposed to internet filtering (Fischer: 2009).

Going forward, a DEEWR interviewee said they would simplify the website and provide content to better target their audiences' needs, now that they have more information about their participants. An enhanced blog structure with introductory topics to guide discussion and a section at the bottom of the site for voting would be trialled. The DEEWR would strongly advocate to again have a closed blog to avoid 'media beat ups'. According to a DEEWR interviewee, 'the media [stories] at the time did not feature in the website at all, [which] showed having a closed blog was the way to go. It kept it professional, kept it on track.' The positive outcome of the DEEWR blog appears to have been a result of the registration process rather than a planned outcome. The structure of the process and lessons

learnt from the previous trial significantly affected the outcome of the consultation for the DEEWR, and certainly would contribute to future blog consultations.

Who speaks? Who listens?

When government consults with citizens, equal access to the consultation remains the normative position. The system for collecting comments, knowledge and experience from citizens about a government policy will affect the outcome of the initiative. An open system of communication that captures comments from anyone who decides to participate is an excellent model of democracy, if it can be applied in a power-free environment. Trials have shown that low-cost, highly accessible blogs provide an ideal mechanism to capture comment from active citizens if the blogs are widely publicised. However, their useability for specific feedback on a government policy is brought into question, because the linear format of the blog means it can be easily skewed by off-topic comments.

The experience of the DBCDE open blog trial affected the set-up of the DEEWR trial, which adapted their processes and used a closed blog system that was accessible only by registration to capture comment and minimise off-topic comments. The closed blog process captured the collective concern of individuals who shared knowledge on the topic so they could contribute and problem solve, regardless of their level of experience and location. Filtering comment in this way goes against the ideals of democracy, where all voices are deemed worthy and important for a robust debate, regardless of a shared agenda (Habermas: 2006). However, when many voices speak, discussion can be easily skewed by the last person's viewpoint or a buzz in the public sphere can cloud and affect consultation of the policy under review. The

challenge lies in how to achieve a true representation of voice when active communities covertly direct consultations that are open to all.

Closed communities, of bloggers who are registered to participate in a consultation be they activist publics or not, recognise they share commonalities on an issue or area of concern and can be regarded as CoIs . These citizens come together to problem solve and provide a good example of web founder Tim Berners-Lee's idea of the internet being about 'shared creativity' with active participants The DEEWR blog illustrates how shared creativity by a CoI improved the outcome for many participants from remote and diverse communities who said there was a positive sense of being connected. 'Having a means to talk, they could bounce things off one another ... they came away having a very good feeling about it' (DEEWR interviewee). Whereas the DCBDE blog strategically connected activist communities who used the blog to protest against internet filtering not on the policy for review. Both represent effective use of a CoI although agendas differed.

While the outcomes of the two blog processes varied significantly, in part because of timing, the structure of the government departments, their culture and core business make a fast response to comments challenging because of entrenched practices used to capture feedback and lengthy timeframes needed to post authorised responses. Arguably, the culture of each department is a contributor to managing the flow of communication and accepting new ways to manage information. While the DBCDE embraced the blog because it exemplified a culture of experimentation and innovation, the DEEWR cautiously applied the blog tool, adapting it to cause minimal disruption. The analysis suggests a culture aligned to their core business, where the co-constructing of stories between an organisation and its publics can be framed.

The lack of response by the DBCDE managers to off-topic comments became the biggest focus of their blog, rather than the content of the policy under review. The irony was that the DBCDE asked for comment and, when it arrived, were unable to respond. The inability for the department to respond to comments made by the minister highlighted the different freedoms of speech afforded department staff and politicians. However, this ambiguity around responding to media commentary is not necessarily reflective of a breakdown in communication within the department, but may be related to an expression of a different agenda and a need to balance relational and political goals prior to a public consultation. Nevertheless, the timing of ministerial announcements needs to be considered, because the media generated around the blog debate became the most prominent part of the consultation and the positive focus was lost.

While media attention had the potential to affect both departmental blogs, it significantly affected the content of the blog that was open to all because discussion could be easily directed off-topic by participants. The limitations evident in the structure of the blog led to significant consequences for the DBCDE, who felt hindered by events that were out of their control. Conversely, the DEEWR found that their blog captured feedback from active publics who could be described as CoI because they were registered to engage with the process and so were able to co-produce cultural materials among individuals, interest groups, civil society and the state within an active public sphere (Castells, 2010).

The two collection methods used to capture comment on government policy via blogs provide insight into the constraints government faces when engaging in an open process of consultation. They suggest that expectations between blogger and government managers in an

exchange differ, and the conversational form expected might not always be possible given the differing agenda of participants. In the words of one poster to the DBCDE blog, ‘the challenge for governments, however, is to structure the passion of bloggers into constructive dialogues.’

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