

Electronic Civic Consultation

**A guide to the use of the Internet in
interactive policy making**

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Preface

This guide deals with electronic civic consultation, an instrument to get the citizen involved into the political process.

Why this guide? I am quite convinced that the electronic highway must and indeed will modify democracy into a shape that is quite different from that of the carrier pigeon era. I shall not elaborate on this, presuming that this guide will primarily be taken up by administrators and civil servants holding the same view. However, stating that technology will change democracy is one thing; predicting the nature of that change is quite another. What exactly, for example, will be the effects in the long run of the interactivity of the Internet? This guide offers a survey of our present knowledge, concentrating on the concept of electronic civic consultation. But we must remember that the Internet is a relatively new phenomenon that is still in a state of flux. And for as yet we do not have much experience with electronic consultation as an instrument. Still, I think this is the right moment to publish this guide. I hope to achieve with it that political government will involve the citizen into political decision-making with the use of information technology more often than has been the case so far; more often, but not less well-considered.

To me, electronic consultation is neither more nor less than a possible instrument. At the time I could have opted for another instrument, the 'electronic petition', for example. The citizen will take the initiative then, which is in itself a gratifying reversal of the usual course of events. That I have opted for electronic civic consultation does by no means imply my being an opponent of electronic petitions. A government that respects both itself and its citizens will deal with such petitions with care as well as with gratification at the involvement shown.

At the time, there was a number of reasons to work out the concept of electronic civic consultation. Without claiming to be exhaustive I mention the following:

- An electronic consultation makes a much more extensive use of the interactive potentials of media such as the Internet than, for example, an electronic opinion poll could do. This means we can learn much more from experiments.
- An electronic consultation is in fact based on the presupposition that the political government has opted for interactive policy making. Thus, there is a large political commitment from the very start.

This second point is a matter of great importance to me. The government cannot carry out noncommittal experiments in relation to its citizens. No matter what instrument will be chosen, it must not be just a 'toy'. Any political administration that considers a civic consultation in a certain concrete situation will find itself facing a dilemma: how to make sure that taking part is to be of interest for the citizen without arousing false expectations. This dilemma is not to be avoided. Choices must be made and those choices must be plainly presented to the citizens approached. I have put it into words as

follows: political primacy shows itself at its best putting up the right 'crush barriers' whenever citizens take part in political decision making.

I emphasize that a guide such as this cannot serve as a recipe. Administrations that have the courage to involve its citizens into political decision-making will have to face certain questions. This guide offers an inventarization of these questions, arguments for and against certain options, and even recommendations, but the final answer is up to the political administration.

The Secretary of State of the Interior and Kingdom Relations,
J. Kohnstamm

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jacob Kohnstamm", is written over two parallel horizontal lines that serve as a signature line.

Part 1

What is an electronic civic consultation and when to organize one?

Introduction

This guide describes how an electronic civic consultation could be organized. This first part indicates the implications of such a consultation and for what reasons a political administration can decide to organize one.

The instrument of electronic civic consultation can be considered as a combination of Interactive Policy-making and the Internet. Interactive policy-making is a method of policy-making that has been applied to an increasing number of areas. An important aspect of this method is that citizens are being involved into decision-making at an early stage. The Internet is part of the modern Information and Communication Technology (ICT). This world-wide computer network has led to a new way of communication between individuals and organizations.

This guide will show that the instrument of electronic civic consultation has been set up from a specific opinion on the part that the Internet can play in renewing democracy and how the Internet will be used within the scope of interactive policy-making.

Electronic discussions in The Netherlands

Since the early nineties experiments have been conducted in the Netherlands with a two-way system of communication with the help of ICT. One of the first implementations in this area was the civic consultation in Hoogvliet. It was here, in 1993, that some hundreds of people filled out a number of questionnaires with the help of two-way cable television (a kind of Ceefax). This was not yet a discussion.

In recent years some dozens of electronic discussions have taken place on the initiative of the government. These discussions were about, for instance, emancipation, ecology or problems of environmental planning. There were also several discussions on the future. These discussions took place at different 'levels' of administration (municipal as well as provincial and national).

An Internet site of a discussion usually offers a number of things. In the first place, it describes the 'process' of the discussion: for whom is this discussion meant, who is the organizing party, what is the aim of the discussion and in what way is it organized. Secondly, an 'information corner' has usually been arranged. This information serves to support the discussion and to give some instruction as to the subject of the discussion. In the third place, there is the discussion itself. Sometimes there is just one discussion page, but usually there are several 'subdiscussions' at the same time. For instance, there is page on the definition of the problem at hand and a page where discussion takes place on possible solutions. Part two of this guide deals in more detail with several possibilities to structure an electronic consultation.

More information on a number of electronic discussions already realized can be had from the research report 'Elektronische Burgerconsultatie. Eerste ervaringen', published by order of the Ministry of the Interior simultaneously with (the original Dutch version of) this guide.

1 Electronic civic consultation

1.1 Features of an electronic civic consultation

As has been described above, electronic discussions between administration and citizens have already been held rather frequently in The Netherlands. But these experiments were often of a noncommittal nature. This does not go well with interactive policy-making. It was primarily to reduce this noncommittal nature of digital debate that a number of demands were formulated. An electronic discussion must comply with these demands to earn the name of 'Electronic Civic Consultation'.

An electronic civic consultation has the following features:

- it is a debate initiated by a political administration, involving citizens into policy-making;
- it takes place at an early stage of the decision-making process, presenting an open question;
- with an electronic consultation the political administration sees to a clear fitting into the decision-making process, to a clear definition of responsibilities and to an account afterwards;
- the consultation is held with the help of Information and Communication Technology.

This definition contains a number of elements, showing that an electronic consultation is anything but a noncommittal exercise. The involved participant can be certain that sensible ideas will be taken into serious consideration.

Firstly, an electronic civic consultation is an initiative of the political administration and is part of a policy-making process. A concrete subject is presented, on which the administration will make a decision. It must be clear we are not dealing here with an isolated action by someone who has no say in the matter.

Secondly, an electronic consultation is to be held at a point in time when a debate as regards content can still actually influence the decision that is to be taken. Every participant in the debate can bring up new facts, arguments, solutions or amendments. In short, he can attempt to bring both his fellow-participants and the administration around to his own point of view. A civic consultation differs in this from an opinion poll, where the citizen can express a preference for one of a number of pre-set solutions.

Thirdly, the political administration is of course responsible for the policy-making process as a whole. If, within that scope, it decides to hold a civic consultation, it will make careful preparations. It will be made particularly clear in advance what is expected of the participating citizen and within what scope he is to operate. The political administration, on the other hand, will state its own commitment. It will indicate what role the government - both political and civil - is to play during the consultation, as well as what will be done with the results afterwards. The political administration will explain how the decision was made and how the results influenced that process.

All this is to guarantee the citizen's trust that the political administration does not just ask a non-committal question, but is really going to make use of the response. In this respect it is only of secondary importance that electronic civic consultation is supported by the so-called new media. The message implied is at best that the political administration is doing everything in its power to make participation as easy as possible.

When an electronic civic consultation has all these features combined, the consultation may have the following functions in a decision-making procedure:

Generation of ideas, resulting in a better decision

Citizens are presumed to possess much know-how and creativity, which can be mobilized 'pro deo'. In this respect, civic consultation is a 'competitor' of consultation of specialists (at a charge), of the use of advisory boards and of research assignments.

Generation of public support

The presumption is that participation in itself will create public support for the policy resulting from it. This function is to be viewed as a desirable side effect. When generation of public support (for a decision already made) is the main issue, the citizens will probably turn his back on the 'discussion'. It is then to be preferred to give information and publicity, aimed at explaining the reasoning in support of the political choice.

1.2 **Consequences of an electronic civic consultation**

When an organization wants to organize an electronic civic consultation it should be realized from the start that it entails quite some consequences. They may concern content (citizens may prove not to want a baffle board at all, for instance, contrary to the town council's assumption), and they may concern organization.

In for a penny...

One has to be well aware of these consequences; once the consultation has been started it must be carried to a proper conclusion. Citizens' expectations are stirred up at the start of a consultation, expectations that have to be lived up to.

Put up 'crush barriers'

Thorough preparations of an electronic consultation are very important. When the consultation has been fully considered in advance and all responsibilities have been clearly defined, the political administration is not likely to encounter unpleasant surprises. The scope given to the citizen by the political administration will partly define the citizens' motivation to participate. This scope is defined by a number of factors. Which subjects are under discussion and which are not? How much time is allotted for the consultation? What will happen after the consultation? What is to be the roles of civil servants and political administrators during the consultation?

The scope given to the citizens by the political administration may mean in some cases that 'laissez faire' is required. The political administration has to trust in the citizens' coming up with really sensible contributions to the decision-making process. Without this confidence the citizens will not spend much energy in the discussion.

In short, before the start of the consultation it must be made clear where the 'crush barriers' have been put up (who is responsible for what).

'Internet culture' versus 'administrative culture'

Experiments with Internet discussions have shown that the normal methods of working of politicians and civil servants often does not go with the manners of 'Internet citizens'. A number of differences prove to be less insignificant than would appear at first sight. One difference in communication style will be noticed quite soon: language. People discussing on the Internet (more or less anonymously) use informal language. Everyone is addressed quite colloquially and spicy language is not unusual. This 'straight from the shoulder' style is quite different from the formalistic and sometimes obscure language that is used in administration circles. It is a matter of 'give and take' in this aspect. When language is objected to during an electronic consultation (too rude or, indeed, too obscure) this individual may try to modify. The moderator ('digital chairman') of a consultation may play an active part in this. 'Translations' may have to be made from time to time, but participants will probably get used to each other quite soon. In the second part of this guide we will go more deeply into these matters.

Reaction time is another important issue. Electronic discussions may go either very quickly or very slowly. When a simple question is sent to an active participant, an answer is normally expected within 2 or 3 days. Civil servants often prove to need more time, because they have to tune the contents of their answers to their organization, particularly to the political administration. And here we have come to an essential issue. Internal attuning concerning electronic discussions has proved to be a problem sometimes.

Position of the political administration

Roughly speaking, the political administration may choose one of two possible positions during a consultation. In the first place, the consultation can be seen as an occasion for politicians to hand over the microphone to the citizens. In the second place, a consultation can be seen as a discourse between electorate and elect.

When a consultation is seen as an occasion for 'citizens to have the floor', administrative contributions during the consultation will be limited to 'official support'. Civil servants may contribute by providing information on request. It is of the greatest importance in this model that it is utterly clear in advance how the political administration will bring itself to account afterwards. Citizens will only participate in a 'discussion-without-politicians' on the condition that politicians will make a more extensive use of it rather than just collecting the reports.

When a consultation is seen as a 'debate between electorate and elect', a (representation of) the political administration will itself take part in the discussion (or authorize a civil servant to speak on behalf of the administration). This variant is more 'interactive' than the first. The presence of the political administration will motivate citizens to participate in the discussion, but will also arouse expectations. A politician should not bring official memoranda into the discussion as if they were contributions; citizens expect a rapid and open debating method. Contributions must be to the point and in relation to content (no evasive tales).

Organization not to be underestimated

Finally, the fact must be stressed that organizing an electronic civic consultation is a lot of work, the first time in particular. Technical realization and moderation ('presiding') of the consultation may easily be contracted out. Part two of this guide will deal with some aspects of the realization of a consultation.

2 In which situation is an electronic civic consultation a suitable instrument?

Two questions make up the title of this, the first part of the guide: what is an electronic civic consultation and when to organize one? The first question has now sufficiently been answered. The next paragraphs will mainly deal with the second question.

Everyone must want it: internal support and political commitment

The first condition for organizing an electronic civic consultation is that all parties in the organization must believe in the added value that the instrument has to offer in a policy-making process. In any case, there must be adequate internal support for the consultation, for it is a delicate process. Without commitment of the parties directly involved the organization will not be able to counterbalance any setbacks that may occur. No more than four 'parties' in a government organization are involved in an electronic civic consultation. The first is (part of) the political administration. The second is the official division that takes care of the communication between political administration and citizens (division of communication, information, administrative networks, for instance). The third is the division responsible for the content of policy-making on the issue at hand. And finally, implementing organizations are also involved sometimes. All these organizations must commit themselves to the civic consultation, if it is to be a success. For citizens will not fail to notice a lack of internal support for their participation. When citizens get to hear a story from a civil servant that is quite different from that of the alderman, they will not invest much time in the consultation.

A suitable subject in an early phase of decision-making

In the second place, the subject must be suitable for a civic consultation. The instrument is to be used within the framework of interactive policy-making. This will only make sense if the process of making decisions on a certain subject is in an early phase; in other words, when the matter is still open to modification. Because the consultation is meant to address citizens, the subject must appeal to them. Also, it must be clearly defined.

This guide emphasizes the condition that the decision-making process on a given subject must be in an early phase. The reason is that a discussion can only be useful when several options are still open to discussion. When a solution to a problem has already been found, there is no sense in organizing a consultation concerning other possible solutions. However, it could be useful, if such is the case, to consult the citizens about implementation of the solution that has been preferred.

How, then, to decide what subjects appeal to the citizen? When a subject is of too general or, indeed, too specific a nature, the citizens will not be interested enough to invest time. Subjects relating directly to the citizen's environment will best appeal to the imagination. Examples are the near future of his residential area or problems caused by traffic jams. However, though the subject is highly appealing and the number of options still open may be ever so attractive, citizens may still refuse to participate when the subject is not clearly defined.

In addition, it must be made clear that the subject is indeed of importance to the citizen and that his contribution may influence the final result of the process. Part two will deal with this in further detail.

Suitable target group

With electronic consultations it must be kept in mind what part of the population can be reached by technology such as the Internet. For as yet, only a limited percentage of the population has access to this technology. Consequently, if the target group equals the total population, the Internet can only serve as an extra to the traditional (and not overly popular) hearings.

A local and small-scale subject, such as the design of a playground, can be discussed in a conventional way, although even in this case an electronic variant can have added value (parents of children who visit playgrounds are often housebound and may participate electronically). A general and large-scale subject (for example, a national debate on the role of knowledge in The Netherlands) will rather have to be tackled with a combination of techniques to warrant the largest possible reach. A highly specialized subject, which is of interest to a targetgroup who, by virtue of their profession, have access to the necessary communication facilities, may very well be discussed by means of electronic methods only.

Part 2

Planning and realization of an electronic civic consultation

Introduction

The first part of this guide deals with the implications of an electronic civic consultation and with situations in which organizing one may be useful. This second part offers concrete recommendations for the planning and realization of an electronic civic consultation. It is understood that the 'conditions' mentioned in the first part have been met. Summing up:

- the political administration has decided that an electronic civic consultation will be held;
- the issue under discussion is well-defined;
- the allocation of responsibilities during the consultation is unequivocal;
- the administration has made clear how results will be used after the consultation and what contributions are expected of the citizens.

We will now consider the practical planning and organization of a civic consultation. Technical aspects of an electronic civic consultation will not be discussed in detail. Design and maintenance of Internet sites must be left to specialists, either inside one's own organization or out. Attention will be given to various methods of structuring a consultation (using the contents of Internet sites).

We will give attention to the options concerning an electronic civic consultation on the basis of six themes:

- advantages for the citizen;
- access and reach;
- clear allocation of responsibilities;
- planning of the discussion;
- the time factor;
- moderation.

The first three themes will be dealt with in chapter 3, 'With the citizen in mind'. Chapter 4, 'Effective planning of an electronic civic consultation', will deal with the other themes.

3 With the citizen in mind

Whether an electronic civic consultation will be a success depends on the participation of the citizens. Their willingness to invest time is necessary in the first place; secondly, their contribution determines the quality of the consultation. When planning an electronic civic consultation, the citizen must always be kept in mind.

3.1 Advantages for the citizen

Why should the citizen participate at all in an electronic civic consultation? The main reason for taking part in a discussion or in interactive policy-making is influence on policy-making concerning a certain subject, or at least gathering knowledge on the subject. There are other, more specific reasons for taking part in an electronic civic consultation in particular.

An electronic debate enables the participant to take part at a time and place of his own choice (as long as that place gives access to the Internet). Also, the participant can take his time to form a well-considered opinion before sending in his contribution.

Often, an electronic debate offers the opportunity to take part anonymously. To some citizens this is an advantage, others find it a disadvantage (because they cannot be certain of other participants' identity).

Finally, an electronic civic consultation offers a good general survey of the information available on the subject under discussion. To keep informed of developments on the subject, the citizens can look at the consultation from time to time. In this way, an electronic 'file' will develop on the subject.

The next paragraphs will show in detail how to 'keep the citizen in mind' when planning an electronic civic consultation.

3.2 Accessibility

A consultation must be as widely accessible as can be, in order to motivate citizens to participate. There are a number of aspects to accessibility. In the first place, there is 'accessibility of content' (subject and information must be presented from the citizens' point of view), and secondly there is 'accessibility of technology' (enable as many citizens as possible to take part in the consultation).

Accessibility of content

It has been mentioned above that the main reason for the citizen to take part in a civic consultation is the presumption that this consultation will give him knowledge of the subject under discussion and influence on the policy-making process. The consequent advice is that the subject must be defined from the citizens' point of view (and indeed with their interests at heart); also, it must be clearly defined how the citizen can contribute.

The definition of the subject must lead to the citizen feeling it to be a 'problem' or a 'challenge'.

The supply of information (which is an important part of an electronic civic consultation) can also be a contribution here. Citizens must be able - and must feel that they are able - to contribute. An information setback is utterly discouraging. But how to present information from the point of view of the citizen? A 'translation' will often have to be made from an administrative definition of a problem to a definition for the citizen. It is precisely in this area that electronic means can be used.

When it is said that 'all available information' on a subject can be brought into the consultation, we may easily think of policy papers, plan of approach and reports of meetings. But most citizens are not used to think in such terms, nor are they prepared to plough their way through such a stack of information. Arrangement of information had better be based on the questions that citizens may have about a subject. When, for instance, the subject is the re-planning of part of a city, questions such as the following may be useful:

- what are the plans at this moment (subdivided in: what will things look like in the future? How quickly will it happen? et cetera)?
- what decisions have already been made and when will any further decisions be made?
- in what way can I participate?

In answering the questions above, information technology can be used to 'translate' the information for the citizen. Information that exists mainly of texts can be made accessible by means of a search structure. In this way, citizens can look up the information they themselves think relevant. Readability of administrative documents can be increased by providing all documents with some explanation: a short summary and information on the context of the document.

In some cases, however, things can be taken one step further. 'Complex' textual information can be converted into 'simple' graphic information with the use of simulation technology. What is a scale-model for a hearing, is a simulation for an electronic civic consultation. Simulations can be used for the explanation of plans and for showing the differences between present and future situations. When projections for the future are not yet available, a 'simulation game' can be used to give citizens some idea of the possibilities (they may, for instance, plan a park by themselves).

The background information of the consultation does not only have to come from the administration. All sorts of groupings, such as interest groups, also have know-how. It is a matter of course, not only to have these groupings participate in the consultation, but also to invite them to make a contribution with their knowledge (the origin of the information must of course be made public). When the relevant parties are notified in time, they can specify their Internet sites in anticipation to the consultation.

Access to technology

As has been stated in the first part, only a limited part of the population has access to the Internet. Therefore, the advice is to organize an electronic civic consultation always simultaneously with more traditional methods of interactive policy-making. But whether or not an electronic consultation is used together with other instruments, efforts must always be made to increase the target group range. For instance, there is an increasing number of public places offering access to the Internet, at a charge or free of charge. Many libraries offer Internet facilities, often furnished with clear instructions. When an electronic civic consultation will be organized, these organizations can be contacted (also,

commercial organizations will sometimes contribute to undertakings such as these). Anyhow, an Internet site will not automatically attract an audience. An electronic civic consultation needs publication. Door-to-door is a possibility, but also the (local) press and, of course, the Internet. Several 'news bulletins' on the Internet are sent round by e-mail. An entry in such a 'bulletin' often leads to frequent consultation of the Internet page concerned.

3.3 Definition of responsibilities

It has been stated several times that transparency is a condition for a smooth proceeding of an electronic civic consultation. There must be total transparency in a number of areas. In the first place concerning the position of a civic consultation in a policy-making process; secondly, concerning the responsibilities of the various 'players' during the consultation. Presentation of the information from the citizen's point of view is a must here too.

Position in the decision-making process

Before the electronic civic consultation is started, it must be clear in which phase of the decision-making process the subject concerned is at that moment. This must be made clear to every participant during the consultation. The following questions are to be answered:

- how will the consultation lead to a concrete decision (and who will take it)?
- are there any other processes that will influence the decision-making (such as other forms of participation or certain studies)?
- to what extent will the political administration consider itself committed to the outcome of the consultation?
- what will happen when the consultation does not show a univocal outcome?
- at what time will the political administration give account of actions proceeding from the consultation?
- in what way will this account be presented (for example, the final decision will be taken only after careful consideration of alternatives offered during the consultation)?

Responsibilities and roles

The first part of this guide has indicated that the political administration and civil servants may play their parts in different ways. It is important for the citizen to know whom he is dealing with. The part that a discussion partner is playing during the consultation is the relevant factor, rather than his profession. Questions within this framework are:

- who is the chairman (referee)?
- who is to provide additional background information, if required?
- will 'the government' also participate, or just await developments?
- how much time will 'the government' dedicate to the discussion (for example; the alderman will contribute to the discussion three times a week, or: questions of fact will be answered within one working day)?

We recommend that every 'player' be named (the political administration, political parties, interest groups, citizens, trade and commerce, civil servants et cetera), and to give an indication of the background of each of them. This description must serve to show which part are to be played during the consultation. The part of the citizen must also be described, for instance:

- is he expected to propose any new ideas, or is he to react to the propositions of others?
- is the discussion allowed to fan out, or will it be directed at consensus during the consultation?

Transparent communication

Transparency has been stated to be essential; transparency of the position of the consultation in a decision-making process and of the parts that are to be played during the consultation. During a concrete consultation each participant must remain aware of these 'understandings', and this must be monitored continuously. Because the audience of participants may change from day to day, it will not suffice to give this information in the first message only. Each individual contributing to the discussion for the first time might be sent an automatic 'message of welcome'.

4 Effective planning of an electronic consultation

4.1 The discussion

The discussion within the framework of an electronic consultation may be set up in different ways. This paragraphs deals with forms and methods known so far. We are dealing here with the discussion-part of the consultation; the information-part has been dealt with in chapter 3. Two subjects are treated in separate paragraphs, because they need extra attention when planning an electronic consultation. These subjects are 'the time factor' and 'the moderator'.

Several possibilities

Readers may be familiar with the fact that the Internet offers several ways of communication. The most frequently used are e-mail, electronic mail, and the World Wide Web (WWW), graphic homepages that can be looked up by anyone (surfing the Internet). Internet discussions may use both ways of communication. The first Internet discussions made exclusive use of e-mail. From 1996, discussions have primarily been held on the WWW, without always excluding participation by e-mail. Discussions by e-mail go as follows. Potential participants of a discussion give their e-mail address. This address is then added to a mailing list. This can be done automatically, but also by hand, so that the organization can check who is participating in the discussion. Individuals on the list can send messages to the discussion. All the others on the list receive the message by e-mail. Below, a print is shown of a message from a discussion on 'tele-democracy' that was held among a number of interested individuals (figure 1). Participants are shown to quote each other (quotes are preceded by '>') and then give their own reactions.

Figure 1

Example of an e-mail discussion, translated from the Dutch original

From: Jan van der Sluis
Date: Thursday July 10th 1997 12.26
To: teledemocracy@utopia.hacktic.nl
Subject: Re: www and e-mail

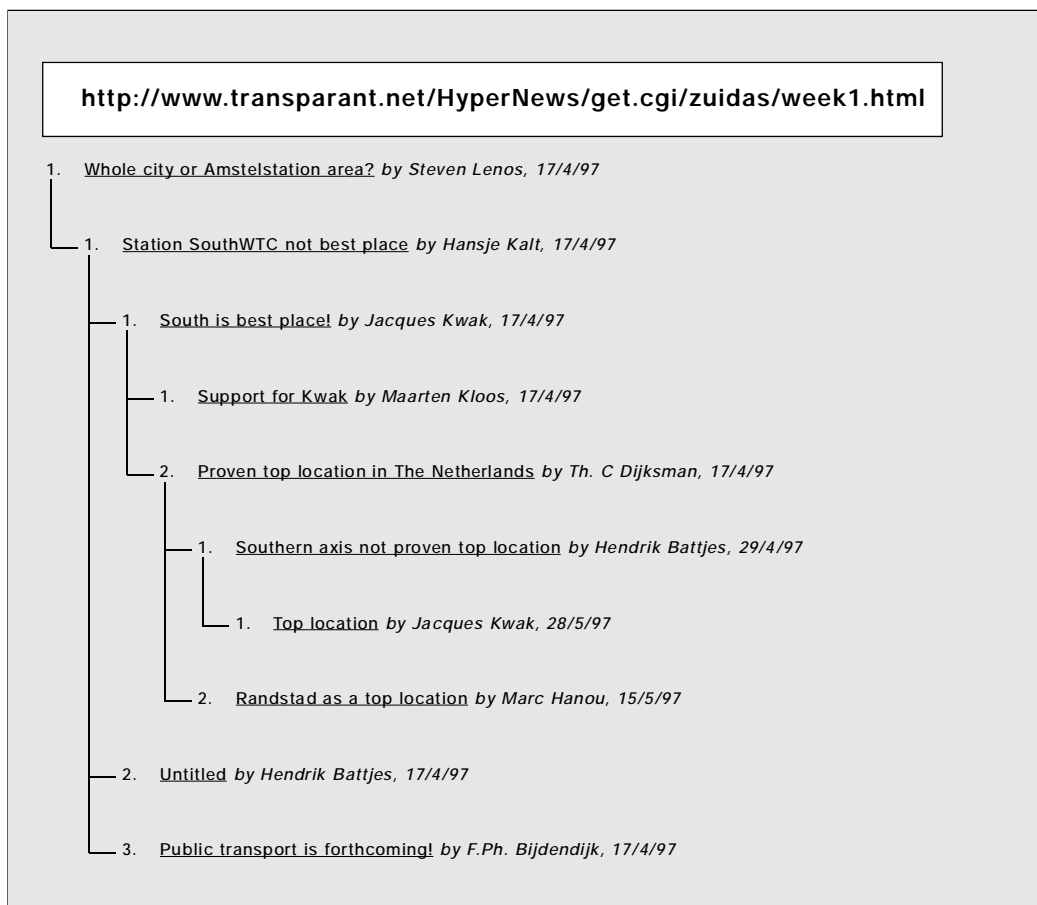
Kees Schalken wrote:

- >
- > On discussions and WWW:
- >
- > I foresee a great future for the so-called
- > 'conferencing'-systems turning up occasionally on the WWW.
- > These systems integrate the direct and interactive elements of the 'old'
- > Internet with the new opportunities of attractive sites,
- > hyperlinks and audio.
- > snip<
- > I think that these still developing systems will make
- > an important contribution to more structured
- > discussions.

I think you are right. There is already something like the Placeware-software for individuals: ICQ or Mirabilis. That doesn't work on the WWW! I never got more than 3-4 people talking, but THE large advantage is that you notice at once when certain people get on line. I'm not yet sure if this contributes to "structured" discussions. You know how things work up till now: everyone on line - IRC or ICQ or anyone else - feels he "must" say something. In short a lot of talking and discussions from

A discussion on the WWW goes somewhat differently from one by e-mail. As a rule, contributions are not sent by e-mail to a central computer, but a form on the Internet is filled out. Next, contributions are arranged in a tree diagram. Other participants can react to each message. In this way the tree branches out and sub-discussions develop. Participants in this way of discussing do not need an e-mail address of their own. Most of the Internet discussions that are organized by the government are held by means of the WWW. Here follows an example of a discussion-page of the 'Digital Think tank Southern axis'. Each title stands for a message, participants can react to the messages. Participants can assign their own icons to their messages.

Figure 2

Example of a WWW discussion, translated from the Dutch original**E-mail and WWW combined**

Organizing a discussion by e-mail is more simple than setting up a WWW-site. However, an e-mail discussion does not offer the same possibilities to structure the discussion. Besides, the WWW offers a larger variety of presentation methods. That is why we advise against running an electronic civic consultation wholly by e-mail.

Participants will notice large differences between the two techniques. Those who participate in an e-mail discussion will receive all messages by 'home delivery'.

Participants in a WWW-discussion must take the initiative to check out on the Internet if there are any new messages.

A combination of both techniques is, of course, to be preferred: the discussion proper is run by WWW, and e-mail is used to send (daily or weekly) summaries to each registered participant. Having read the summaries, participants may decide whether or not to look up the discussion.

Structure

A discussion may be structured in several ways. Some discussions are limited to a single page. A single tree structure will develop for the whole of the discussion.

The consultation may sometimes be divided into different parts. For instance, several discussions may be held one after the other. One about the definition of a problem first, followed by one about possible solutions and finally a 'conclusive' discussion. Each discussion is started on a 'clean slate' and will have its own tree structure. It is also possible to run several discussion pages simultaneously. For instance, beside the main discussion, there is also one on the environmental aspects of the issue under discussion. But other divisions are also possible. Recently, a discussion was held on the basis of

propositions, followed by arranging the reactions for and against.

Only rarely is an Internet discussion concluded with something like a vote. A vote should be used with reserve. A 'vote' suggests that a 'decision' is being taken, whereas the final decision is to be taken by the political administration. Besides, a 'vote' is associated with representativeness. A vote may of course show the views of the participants, but will easily suggest to be representative for the population as a whole. Anyway, it is the quality of arguments rather than the number of participants that matters in an electronic civic consultation.

Open participation and anonymity

Two important issues will have to be faced when organizing an electronic civic consultation: who will be invited to participate and what are the possibilities for anonymous participation? These issues are interrelated.

Participation in a discussion may be open to anyone. In that case, any Internetter may contribute and read the contributions of others. Also, more closed discussions are possible, during which a select company (for instance Dutch general practitioners only) is allowed to look up the discussion and make contributions. Combinations are also possible, for example when there is a discussion for a select company of participants, that can be followed by everyone.

Also, the measure of anonymity can be varied. Access to the discussion can be made more or less easy, depending on the nature of the discussion. The most anonymous form is to enable people to participate without any identification (so that the discussion will be open to anyone). Anonymity decreases when people are demanded to give their names and e-mail addresses with their reactions (these data will then appear in their messages). However, participants may use false data and yet take part in the discussion. If this is to be prevented, candidates for participation may be asked to subscribe in advance, before sending them a password by e-mail. This is to verify their e-mail addresses. Candidates can contribute only when they use their real e-mail address. But some e-mail addresses cannot be traced back to an owner. To end all anonymity it is an option to demand a postal address and send the password by way of normal post. But this is highly unusual. Communication on the Internet often takes place anonymously or under a pseudonym. This has its advantages and its disadvantages. An anonymous participant does not mince his words, he speaks in plain terms. However, this may deteriorate into gross remarks and an exchange of abuse. Also, anonymous discussion means not knowing who is speaking, so that the usual barriers of 'class' are absent. No one can distinguish whether a contribution has been written by a manager or by a secondary school pupil. On the one hand, this may enhance the openness of the discussion; quality of arguments is the main object. On the other hand, it is more difficult for readers to 'place' the message. We advise against total anonymity during an electronic civic consultation. Active participants should always be asked to leave their e-mail addresses in view of sending round summaries and 'business announcements' by e-mail.

A goodly number of 'auditors' are known to follow Internet discussions, without actively taking part. These auditors are known as 'lurkers'.

The time factor

The Internet has been said to neutralize restrictions of time and place. This is only partly true. The use of the Internet certainly offers advantages compared to activities that are very much bound to time and place. Civic participation in the traditional sense takes place at a certain time and at a certain location. An electronic civic consultation will take at least some weeks and is accessible from any computer with a connection to the Internet. This lack of restriction to time and place offers important advantages, but it also has its drawbacks. People must take the initiative themselves in order to participate. A traditional participation evening is an event to simply write down in a diary. Not so with an electronic civic consultation. That is why participants must be notified of the progress of the consultation. It should also be kept in mind that participants have to invest time in participation in a consultation. A sound structural basis to information and set-up of the discussion should facilitate citizens to participate as efficiently as possible.

Provide 'crowd pullers'

In earlier paragraphs it has been recommended to send round summaries by e-mail at regular intervals. These summaries may involve people in the discussion between times. Summaries could also be published in (local) newspapers, to enable people who do not (yet) participate to follow the consultation.

Another option is to organize the process in distinct phases; a discussion may be held by the end of each phase with a member of the political administration (once every fortnight on Wednesday evenings, for instance). This could be done by regular 'tree structure'-technique, but there are other possibilities, such as the 'chatbox'. The 'chatbox' - IRC, Internet Relay Chat - can be compared to the 'partyline' by telephone (making it possible to chat with several people simultaneously). Even as one participant is typing, the others will receive his message on their screens at once.

Do not take too long a time for an electronic civic consultation

In recent years 'popular' new discussion lines in an electronic consultation has been shown to run well for a period of two weeks and generate many reactions. After that, the discussion appears to drop off and a number of participants wishes for a fresh issue. This is certainly true of 'problem-scanning' consultations. When the consultation is run in phases, the advice is to make use of two-week periods.

When a discussion has an issue of general interest for a subject and aims at consensus, a longer period of time is probably more useful.

Keep in mind that an electronic consultation will need some warming-up. Previously fixed terms must not be dealt with too strictly. It may take some time before the discussion has truly 'taken off' (investing time in good publicity in advance will keep this time within limits).

Moderation

At the end of this guide we deal with one of the trickiest aspects of an electronic consultation. Moderation ('chairing') of an electronic consultation is tricky because the moderator must see to it that the consultation runs smoothly. Mistakes made during the preparation or the execution of the consultation mean trouble for the moderator. This paragraph describes the different roles the moderator can play during the consultation and dwells on a number of reproaches that may be heaped on the moderator.

Roles of the moderator

The moderator is primarily the host, he makes participants feel at ease and shows the way (where to find information, how does the discussion work, what 'players' are involved). Secondly, the moderator in his quality of panel chairman tries to run the consultation as smoothly as possible. Do the participants understand each other well enough and does every participant make contributions? Also, he may ask certain individuals to contribute specific knowledge. And finally, the moderator takes the part of referee. When participants do not react to mildly leading requests (to stop their abuse, for instance), it may even be necessary to filter certain messages out of the discussion after they have been placed. Also, when participants address issues out of the order, a decision to filter the discussion may have to be taken.

The roles of the moderator need to be distinguished and it must be explained to the participants that he is to play all of these three roles simultaneously. But it is also an option to have different people play these different roles.

Reproaches directed at the moderator

The moderator may have to face reproaches that he is biased and is trying to manipulate the discussion, particularly when messages are filtered out of the discussion. It is imperative to make careful use of this instrument. It will be viewed as censorship very easily. Freedom of speech is of paramount importance to the discussion culture of the Internet. That is why it is advisable to appoint an 'independent' moderator. It is also important not to let filtered messages 'disappear', but to place them on a separate page. Messages that are out of order can also have their own page. Thus, all participants are able to find messages that have been moved.

References

This guide is partly based on the results of the study 'Elektronische Burgerconsultatie, Eerste ervaringen' .

This report has been published simultaneously with this guide. The report is available from the Ministry of the Interior, phone (070) 3026755, (070) 3026742.

Some parts of this guide are based on the graduation paper 'Inspraak Interactief?', written on assignment by the Ministry of the Interior in 1997.

In 1995 an article was published in 'Openbaar Bestuur' , positioning the concept of the Electronic Civic Consultation. It appeared on pages 52-56 of 'Openbaar Bestuur', 1995, number 9, and was written by J.G.A. van den Broek.

In 1996 the Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek published an interesting booklet on interactive policy making. It is called 'De inspraak voorbij' and was written by L. Veldboer. On an experiment with the 'Besliswijzer' (an electronic discussion in the province of Northern Brabant) the Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek published a booklet in 1997, called 'Besliswijzer beproefd' . In 1998, the same institute will regularly publish a newsletter on the application of the Internet in behalf of democracy. The Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek can be contacted by phone (020) 5217600.

A very readable book appeared in 1997, on the possible consequences of information technology for democracy. It is called 'Nieuwe media en politiek, informatie- en communicatietechnology voor burger, politici en ambtenaren' , by dr. J.A.G.M. van Dijk. The publisher is Bohn Stafleu Van Loghum at Houten.

In 1998 the Voorlichtingsraad published a 'Checklist communicatie bij interactief beleid' This checklist is primarily meant for civil servants of the national government. It can be ordered by phone (070) 3564162.

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