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IBES
Institute for a
Broadband-Enabled Society

Political Issue Analysis System

Policy deliberation in the age of information abundance

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1. Executive Summary

The Political Issues Analysis System (PIAS) project sought to investigate how citizens in Melbourne, Australia used the Internet to seek political information about key political issues. It also sought to understand how citizens contacted their elected representative about these issues. Through workshops, case studies, and the development and testing of a prototype, the research uncovered some notable trends in terms of engagement with components of the formal political system online.

Email remains the favoured means of contacting elected representatives. There are a number of systems being developed to assist online politics yet individuals still report having great difficulty discovering policies from the major parties in key policy-debate areas. Furthermore, many of the policies published by the parties exist as political advertisements and do not necessarily aid balanced or deliberative debate. This suggests that further research examining online engagement with formal political processes in key policy areas is needed. In addition, pressure needs to be placed on the parties to provide machine-readable information and to allow open-access to structured policy material that can be aggregated into third-party systems that will aid voter decision making.

1.1 Key findings

The key findings of this research are derived from testing citizen's ability to search for and find policies online, to contact their local Member of Parliament, and to use the prototype we developed to aid in these tasks.

To assist citizens to search for party policies we developed PoliFish; a system that orders the online published policies of Australian political parties according to user set preferences. It was developed to aid deliberation processes by making policies available so they can be compared in a non-partisan and non-party-centric way. Users could browse for the political issues they were interested in and then be directed to the policies that all the Australian Electoral Commission registered parties have on that issue. Issues ranged from education and environment, to health and the economy.

However, developing PoliFish and other systems to deliver political information online is not all together an easy task, given that politics is a socio-cultural phenomena that does not easily lend itself to the formal processes of computing and the communication practices associated with it. This is compounded because the quality of the policy information provided by most political parties is poor and is not available in a form that makes it easy to aggregate into other systems for comparison and analysis. Testing individuals abilities to find information and policies on key political issues we discovered that:

- When searching for information on a particular environmental issue, more than 50% of the respondents at the workshop knew of the site before they entered the URL and 65% of these chose Wikipedia as their first site.
- When asked to contact a local member, 50% preferred email.
- Many workshop participants indicated that finding information about political policies was difficult and the parties' websites were difficult to navigate.

- Many workshop participants liked the idea of presenting policy information through the PoliFish prototype although a number of people did not find the navigation system intuitive, citing that they were not used to dealing with information in such a manner.
- Follow up discussions with workshop participants indicated that Google was the preferred means to search for sites on political issues using simple key word search and going no deeper than the first two pages of search results.
- When searching for particular policies on environmental issues, such as emission reduction policies or nuclear energy policies, only half were able to cite a policy from a political party. Of these, 63% indicated Greens policies. This suggests that the party's willingness to publish their policies in a coherent, structured and accessible manner was beneficial to searching and retention.
- When workshop participants were asked to find a site where they could discuss issues with other citizens, a key component of deliberative democracy, 70% could find such a site but no single site dominated.

When we tested PoliFish participants were asked to find policies in the context of the importance that political parties place upon them. We discovered that:

- More than half the respondents correctly found the parties with the least-importance placed on climate-change policies. These included Australia First Party, Australian Fishing and Lifestyle Party, Building Australia party, Democratic Labor Party, Australian Sex Party, Family First, and Shooters and Fishers Party. These minor parties had no policies concerning Climate Change and were ranked as 0/9 on the PoliFish system (ie. no important policies). This may also reflect the fact that they were largely minor, single-issue parties with a small policy portfolio.
- When participants were asked to find the political party with the most radical renewable energy policy (100% renewable energy by 2020), 75% of the respondent were able to find the correct party even though it was a rather obscure party, the Carers Alliance. Although one of the easier tasks, PoliFish was able to sort policies effectively according to user preferences which would have been very time-consuming and difficult by other means.
- The Greens have a specific policy to remove GST from public transport. When participants were asked to find this Greens Policy, only 20% of respondents were able to. This appears to be because the policy was not explicitly stated on the first navigational level, and users had to go through multiple policy documents to find it. A more explicit search function on the PoliFish would have overcome this; but this might also undermine some of the deliberative, browsing functions of the PoliFish.
- When participants were asked which parties support a Carbon Tax, almost 90% of respondents were able to name them correctly. This was despite mention of the carbon tax being very rarely explicitly stated on party web sites. Participants may have had prior knowledge of this particular broad question, given its exposure in other media, rather than deliberating through PoliFish.

1.2 Key recommendations

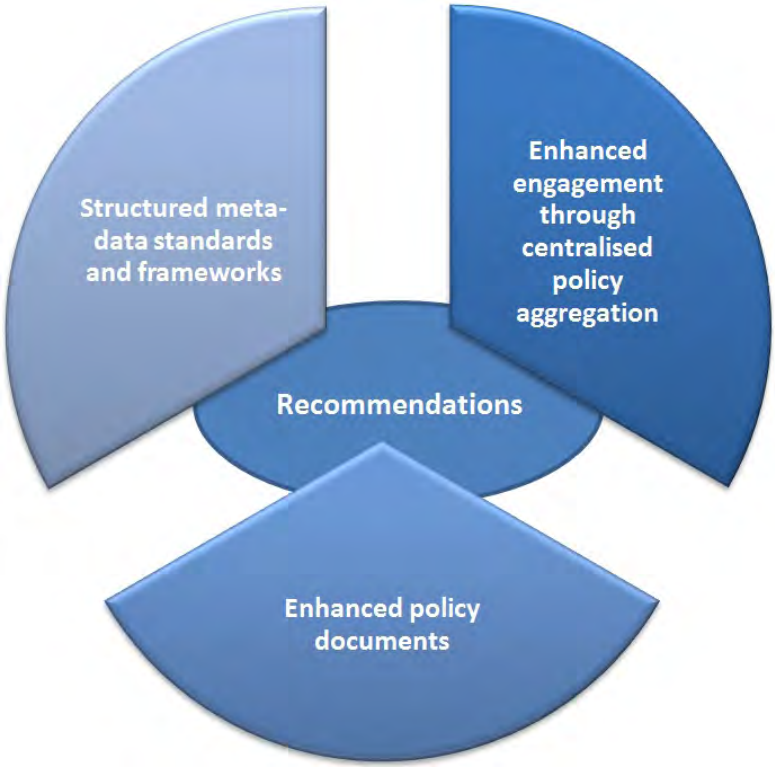

Figure 1

One of the key themes that emerged from the workshops is that citizens find it difficult to locate quality policy information online. It also shows that there have been few attempts to aggregate the different policies of Australian political parties so that voters can compare and deliberate upon them. This appears to be a key barrier to the Internet being used effectively by Australian citizens to engage with formal democratic structures. Some of the key recommendations of this study include:

Enhanced policy documents:

- Polices published by political parties should be made available in such a way that they can be aggregated into other systems so that citizens may compare policy positions (eg in machine readable formats, preferably using a neutral schema).
- Pressure should be placed on the political parties to produce clear, concise, and understandable policy information for the public.

Structured meta-data standards and frameworks

- Metadata publishing standards and frameworks should be utilised by political parties when publishing documents so that the information aggregated is of a high-standard allowing it be utilised effectively.

Enhanced engagement through centralised policy aggregation:

- A central site needs to be developed where the key policies of the parties can be aggregated. This would allow the policies to be structured, browsed, and compared in innovative ways such as through visual or other means.
- The most likely developer of such a service should be a non-partisan group within the Federal public service (such as the AEC), a University, civil society group or, less ideally, a media outlet. This could build on previous projects, such as Australian Policy Online, OpenAustralia, however, it is important that such a project is open, non-commercial and both credible and trustworthy.

2. Introduction

This study critically engages with the idea of 'information abundance'. It investigates how increasing capacities to deliver digital information through new processes does not necessarily increase the quality and value of that information. Given current contemporary levels of political knowledge and a well documented democratic drift amongst the public, this concept becomes especially important when political information is delivered with the intent of increasing the political knowledge of citizens and their ability to interact with the political process in a more meaningful way.

The Internet is increasingly recognised as a vital component of our political information systems yet its effects upon political processes; and particularly deliberative political process—positive or otherwise—remain relatively under-researched. UK research suggests that the Internet is a concurrent channel, supplementing and enhancing existing information sources and that it's use for political information is mediated by its normative adoption.[1] Emerging research also suggests that the Internet's capacity to easily produce information can lead to information overload and this undermines its deliberative potential. With the advent of the NBN the 'data deluge' promises to intensify and increase the need to understand how political information—in its various guises—can be delivered in more meaningful and effective ways.[2]

This project contributes to the debate about political engagement online in light of the development of even greater broadband capacity through the NBN. This research encompasses a working prototype termed PoliFish and this report that is contextualised within the literature, including a series of case-studies and recommendations.

2.1 Methodology

The study used a combination of prototype development, user studies, and case-studies. The contextual analysis of this work was provided through research in the field of digital democracy, especially recent works that question the belief that the Internet is inherently democratic. As Evgeny Morozov argues, the belief in the Internet's inherent political efficacy is perhaps tied to the historical emergence of the Internet during the end of the cold-war and the belief that unfettered information online may have contributed to this (and thus progresses a free and democratic society; it may also undermine a free and democratic society)[3]. We also consulted recent government reports on the subject of eGovernment and eDemocracy to look for contemporaneous strategies, technical developments, and recommendations in the field. Drafts of the case-studies were sent to the developers and editors of the projects for comment. Finally, a draft of this report was sent to Dr Andy Williamson, an independent researcher, formerly the Director of the Hansard Society's Digital Democracy Programme in the UK and member of the We-Gov consortium for final comment. These comments are incorporated in the report.

[1] Gibson, Rachel K. , Williamson, Andy & Ward, Stephen 'The Internet and the 2010 election' (UK), <http://hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/edemocracy/archive/2010/07/29/the-internet-and-the-2010-election.aspx> (Accessed 17 August, 2011).

[2] One of the first major agencies to coin the term the 'Data Deluge' was the UK's JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee): Briefing Paper, Data Deluge: Preparing for the Explosion in Data, 1 November, 2004 <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/briefingpapers/2004/pub_datadeluge.aspx> (Accessed 14 May, 2010).

[3] Matthew Hindman, the Myth of Digital Democracy, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2009
Evgeny Morozov, The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World, Penguin Books, London, 2011.

2.1.1 Parameters of study

The term 'digital democracy' is a broad umbrella term that encompasses a range of political projects and theoretical perspectives. Projects may range from single-issue political blogs, to digital democracy companies that have built and employed a range of tools for dialogue and consultation. There are also sophisticated social media strategies from the major political parties. For the purpose of this study, we were chiefly concerned with testing some basic democratic processes such as how citizens find published policy information online, how citizens find their local member, and how they discuss policies issues with other citizens. We then attempted to design and test a system to aid in some of these tasks. *It is this fundamental usage of the Internet for political purposes that it often overlooked in larger theories about the political efficacy of the Internet.*

As a small seeding study, this study cannot claim to be a broad and extensive analysis nor concrete practical solution to the problem of citizen engagement with political party policies. Much more work needs to be done in the field within Australia; especially critical studies that are bold enough to face the disappointments of the medium as well as its potentials.[4]

The prototype used in the study relied upon the published policy documents of the political parties. This data is unreliable and the only means of making it available through the PoliFish system was through a labour-intensive, hand coding process. This process was also prone to inaccuracy and is not sustainable in the longer term. A semi-automated process could be developed if the political parties provided their policy data in a machine readable form so that it may be automatically aggregated. The push for data to be made available in such a way should come from a non-partisan segment of the Australian public sector or perhaps through a University-funded service. Making such data available would be a major contribution to strengthening Internet democracy in terms of engagement with the policies of the political parties, which is an important component of deliberative democracy.

Against this background, this research is not conclusive in an empirical sense and more user studies need to be undertaken. In addition, there are a noticeable lack of deliberative tools and services in the Australian context and much of the understanding of these tends to surround innovations from American commercial Internet service companies, such as Google, Twitter and Facebook. These companies have their own governance structures and commercial imperatives and there is an inherent danger in components of the Australian political system relying too heavily on foreign IT infrastructure, governance and legal structures that are neither transparent nor electable. Although these systems are valuable for distributing links to policy data, there a clear need for independent infrastructure outside of foreign-controlled communication systems.

[4] Ibid.

2.1.2 Workshops

As part of this study, we conducted two workshops, attended by 18 registered voters. In these workshops we evaluated:

a. how they sought political information online;

b. how they interacted with other voters;

c. how they contacted elected Members of Parliament, and;

d. how they used the PoliFish System to assist them in these tasks (primarily tasks relating to finding and comparing party policies).

We wanted to learn from citizens with some investment in the political process so only recruited those who were both registered voters and had sought and contributed to political information online in the past four months. We engaged the participants in research-related activities which included finding information relating to key political issues and then locating the policies on those issues. The issues we tested were of an environmental nature as it is a key policy platform for all major, and most minor, political parties (and indeed some parties exist purely for this policy platform). At the end of the workshop there was time for discussion in which more valuable qualitative information about the participants online searching patterns was discovered (for the questions asked in the workshops see: Appendix A)

Age	
20-30	72%
30+	28%

Level of Education	
Undergrad	61%
Post-Grad	28%
No tertiary	11%

Location	
Inner suburbs	50%
East suburbs	45%
North suburbs	5%

2.1.3 Prototype (PoliFish)

As a major undertaking within this study, we developed a prototype system to link to the online published policies of all the political parties registered by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) at the last Federal election (21 August, 2010).[5] The prototype was developed as a tool to assist voters find and compare policies in a non-partisan and deliberative way. The prototype is based on the iFish application which was developed by Jon Pearce and Mitchell Harrop from the Department of Information Systems (DIS) at the University of Melbourne. It was developed to enable interactive exploration of data-sets.[6] It utilises a set of sliders and check boxes to alter preferences about policies then reorders them according to these preferences in an animated way (see: Figure 2 below)

PoliFish was developed to promote a more deliberative means to find information about political policies as there is currently no central place where citizens can discover and compare the policies of the various parties. South Australia Policy Online[7] and Australian Policy Online (see: Case study 4.1), do provide excellent materials on policy formation, but do not link to the parties' policies themselves. If the parties' policies were available in machine readable form, they may be linked into these systems to promote wider dialogue and engagement. A recent study *Parliament 2020: Visioning the Future of Parliament* found that citizens do want more dialogue and engagement with their politicians. The Internet, through good application of its technical capacities, is one means to achieve this.

The data set used in the PoliFish system derives from registered political parties and the policies published on their websites. They were often only available at HTML or PDF files and were often not published with an individual URL; thus making the task of linking to them difficult. In addition, the task of categorising them for PoliFish was both an interpretive and laborious exercise as policies such as 'health' and 'economy' differed vastly between the parties in terms of detail and policy portfolio. This fact highlights one of our main contentions that all policy data should be made available in a consistent, readable, and re-usable way so that it may be used in a meaningful way in other parts of the Internet.

The sliders with check-boxes in PoliFish were divided into five groups corresponding to top-level political issues (environment, economy, health. education, society). They were then divided into sub-topics such as 'climate' and 'mining issues'. The policies of the parties were then categorised as say 'climate' and then ranked from zero to ten according to the importance the party placed upon that policy. Zero standing for 'no policy' and ten standing for 'highest importance'. The Climate Skeptics party, for instance, do not believe in climate change, but their policy on it is of high importance (thus ranked 'ten'). Likewise, the Green Party wish to stop climate change and thus place high importance on it as a policy so it is also ranked 'ten'. If users of PoliFish are interested in climate change they would find both parties; enabling them to deliberate on either policy position.

Of course the policies available through PoliFish could have been ranked and ordered in different ways.

[5] "Current Register of Political Parties", Australian Electoral Commission, http://www.aec.gov.au/parties_and_representatives/party_registration/registered_parties/index.htm (Accessed 22. August, 2011)

[6] "iFish", Mitchell Harrop, http://disweb.dis.unimelb.edu.au/student/RHD/moharrop/iFish.php (Accessed 22. August, 2011)

[7] "South Australia Policy Online", SAPO, http://www.sapo.org.au/ (Accessed 22. August, 2011)

But the important point is that through making the policies available in a central location, new insights are available to both the developer and users of such as system. Further enhancements to the system, such as semi-automated aggregation and the incorporation of user feedback in a purposeful way could be made through a more ambitious project.

Figure 2: Whole Pol-iFish

Figure 3: Interacting with a slider makes the dataset re-order accordingly

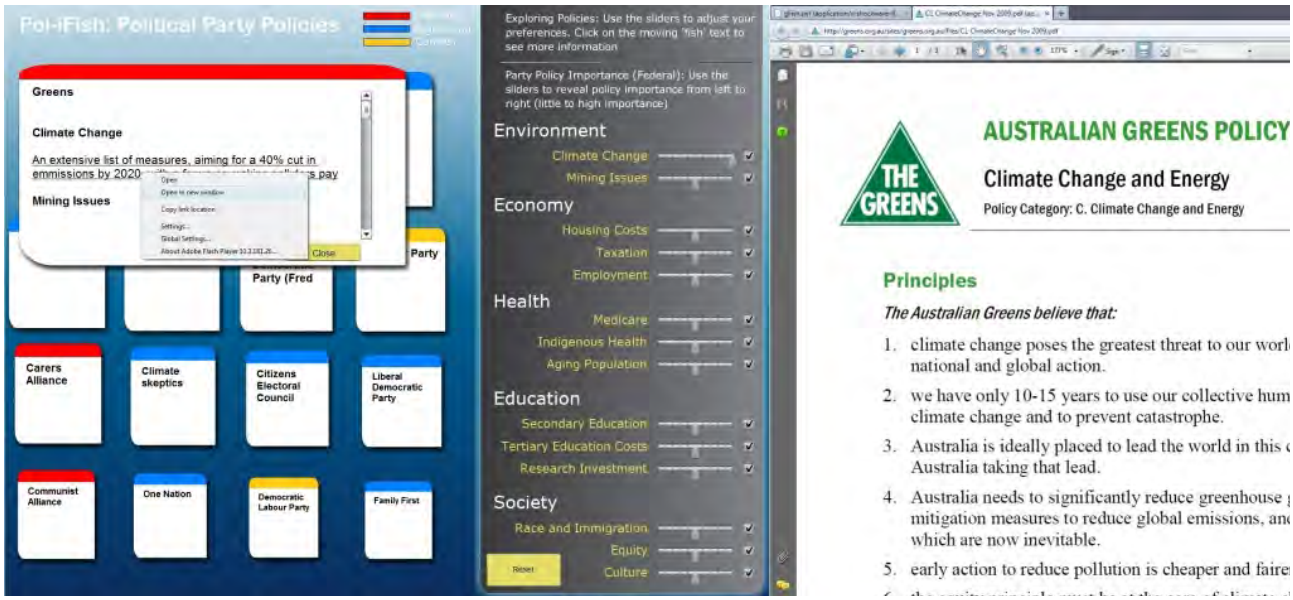

Figure 4 When clicking on a policy in a chosen party's navigation panel it opens a link to the policy information

2.1.4 Case studies

Through discussions with the developers of a number of digital democracy initiatives, we were able to contextualise the work within initiatives in the field. The case studies are listed in Section 4.

3. Workshops: engaging with policies

3.1 Locating policies online

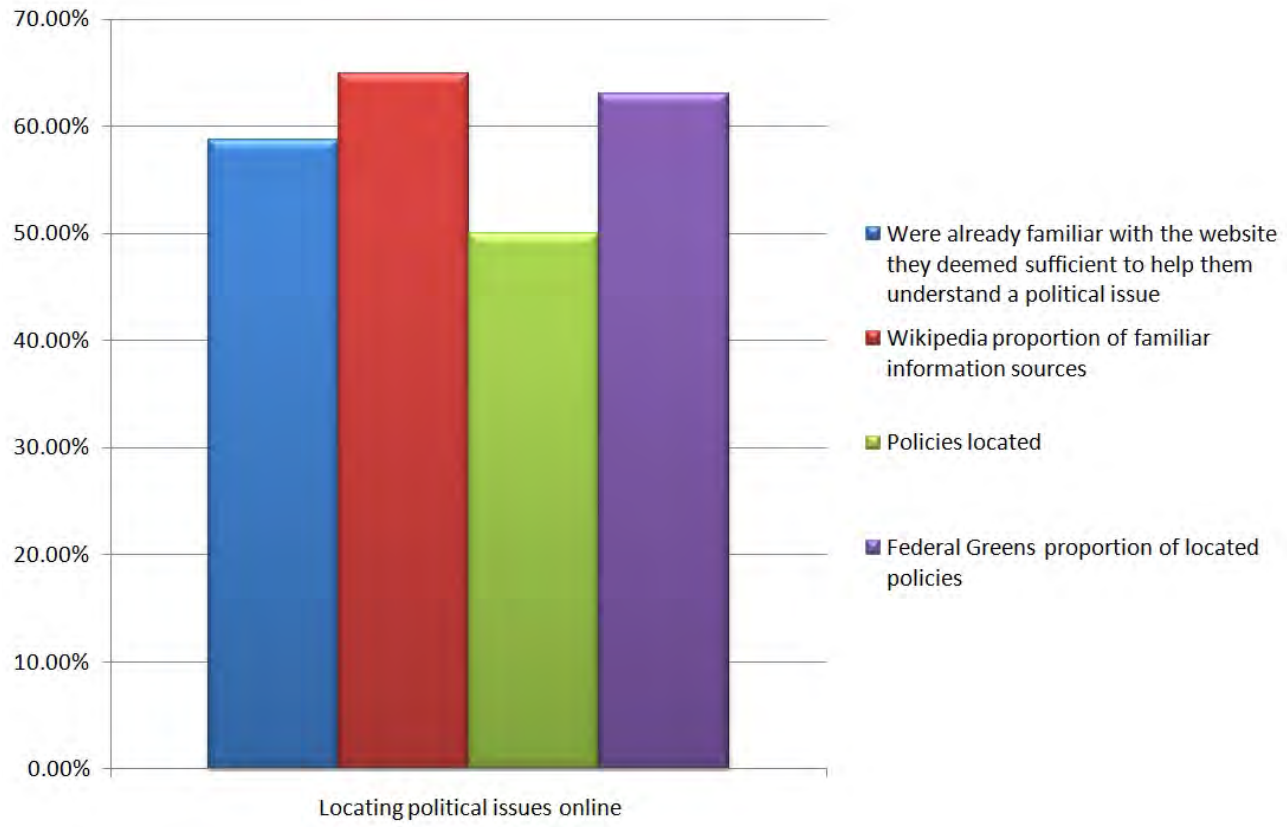

Figure 5

Policies from across the range of registered Australian political parties are presented in radically different ways online. They are often embedded deep within websites and there remains a tendency to publish them in PDF format, which is both clumsy for users and virtually impossible to parse automatically. This makes it difficult to:

a. find specific policies from a particular party;
b. compare policies across different parties; and
c. use policy data in other web-based systems.

The 'deliberative' potential of the Internet is much larger than one individual website, so making policy data available in consistent machine readable formats broadens the engagement opportunity and allows policy information to be represented and reused in an wide variety of ways across multiple systems. This in turn increases the propensity for citizens to find, access and use policy information in order to make informed democratic decisions.

From undertaking the workshops in this study we discovered that users found it difficult to find policies and very difficult to compare policies between parties. There is an optimistic assumption here that individuals are motivated enough to deliberate upon the various policy positions of the parties; however given the right

systems, the deliberative potential of the Web may be more fully realised for a motivated electorate. We also recognize that the Internet of itself cannot increase democratic motivation, but it can reduce the barriers to accessing that information, thereby reducing the motivational threshold for political consumers.

3.2 Searching patterns

We asked citizens to locate sites about political issues and to indicate if they knew of the site before. The majority of citizens did, however the majority of these uses Wikipedia as their first reference (thus 'know before').

Reliance on prior knowledge in searching for political issues

Information Sources	
Known before	58.7%
Found searching	41.3%

3.3 Interacting with politicians

The majority of citizens preferred to use email to contact their local elected member. Email addresses are usually found on local party websites but many of these sites required the completion of an online form to contact their member, rather than allowing direct emailing. Although many MPs are now using social networking software, such as a number of Green and Labor MPs, no participants indicated that they used these tools to contact their local member.

Preferred medium for contacting politicians	
E-mail	50%
Phone	17%
Online Form	23%
Joined Party	5%
Don't Know	5%

3.4 Using PoliFish to find policies online

The Pol-iFish system was introduced as the final task in the workshops after several free-form searching tasks. Participants generally welcomed the way Pol-iFish presented information and found it easy to use; especially because it re-ordered policy information instantaneously. Participants found it intuitive and welcoming to explore information in such a way.

Before being introduced to Poli-Fish in the workshops many participants were:

> ...surprised how difficult it was to find a wide range of policies in one place to compare. Often had to rely on previous knowledge of Internet plus policies in order to have answers – *James*

and,

> It was hard to find a website that listed the policies of the different parties in a way that allowed to compare. – *Greg*

and,

> It was difficult to find exact statements on party policies. – *Shameeta*

After using the Pol-IFish system, most of the participants found that several of these problems had been solved, although they had new questions about how the policies within Pol-IFish had been sorted and ranked. Further development with the system could provide a 'crowd sourcing' solution to the sorting and ranking of the policies (and standardised access to government policy data).

4. Case Studies

There are many projects within Australia that attempt to utilise the Internet for political purposes. These range from small, independent projects to all-of-government strategies. The case-studies examined here are only a small sample of the range of projects available and are listed to contextualise our work within the experiences of those who have developed—and are developing—democratic application of the Internet. We have also examined one important European project, WeGov that it is at the forefront of engagement with formal democratic process using social networking strategies.

The first project we examined was Australian Policy Online that is the largest online resource for Australian policy information. It provides access to policy documents in various stages of development—and from many segments of society—but does not specifically provide access to party-based policies. BelowTheLine is an independent initiative aimed to help voters better understand their voting choices in Upper House elections. By voting below-the-line the voter gets to choose candidates in order of their own preference; rather than preferences allocated by the parties (as is the case if the citizen votes above the line in Australia's preferential voting system). OpenAustralia provides access to the most important record of the workings of Federal Parliament; the Hansard (Parliamentary Record). Citizens are able to search Hansard through the OpenAustralia project to read about their Member's appearance in Parliament. GetUp is an advocacy organisation, highly active in the broader community that champions key issues voted upon by GetUp subscribers. The core coordinators may then support these key issues through launching campaigns that may include paid broadcast advertisements, posters, and other lobby work. Australia's National Forum is an online portal including a journal, forum, pollsters, and collection of political blogs. The site works as a publishing outlet and discussion board for largely journalistic comment. WeGov is a large-scale trans-national project funded by the EU 7th Framework Programme that is developing a means to allow two-way dialogue between citizens and policy makers. Through information exchange with social network sites, analysing online discussion, and developing visualisation tools, they will be able to monitor and report upon large-scale discussions of a policy-orientated nature.

4.1 Australian Policy Online

Region	Australia
Partners	Australian Policy Online is a partnership of the Australian National Institute for Public Policy at ANU and the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University of Technology. Other supporters include the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network
Funded by	Australian Policy Online has received a number of Australian Research Council LIEF grants to support its infrastructure development.
Project start	2002 – ongoing
Website	http://www.apo.org.au/

Introductory description

Australian Policy Online identifies, catalogues and archives research reports and other resources about policy issues in Australia and disseminates updates on the latest publications. The contributors to the site range from academic research centres to Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), to government departments. The site covers nearly 400 Australian and international sources based on a core membership of 170 research centres from around Australia. The content provides free access to full text research reports and papers as well as selected commentary, audio, video, books and web resources.[8] The audience is primarily those involved in policy development in government, universities, NGOs and the public. The site gets a weekly update of about 35 new listings and hosts over twelve thousand articles. Advertisements for jobs, events and training courses are listed under the classifieds section.

Background

APO was founded in 2002, and since this time, has established itself as an important resource for many people involved in policy research in Australia. Funding for the site's development has been provided via a number of Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Infrastructure and Equipment Fund grants, over the year as well as the via the support of Swinburne University and more recently the Australian National University. Support for the Creative Economy section has been provided with the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI) and Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN). Since its inception the editors have built up a substantial audience through an email 'Weekly briefing' of new resource plus the site offers Twitter and RSS feeds within the various key topic areas that the site covers.

Technological approach

In 2009 APO was upgraded to the open source Drupal content management system. Using Drupal APO

[8] 'About', Australian Policy Online, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne <http://apo.org.au/blog/?p=46> (accessed 20 July, 2011).

has built a comprehensive search and browsing facility, including faceted and taxonomic search of topics, subtopics and keywords. A customisable, targeted subscription service allows readers to choose from the eclectic range of resources that the site contains. The content of the site is also discoverable through the National Libraries TROVE search service via APO's OAI (Open Archives Initiative) facility. And whilst the content and meta-data of the site is entered manually, the editors are exploring ways in which meta-data and content may be populated in a semi-automated way. An upgrade to Drupal 7 is planned for early 2012 which will may assist this and also open up options for providing an API (Application Programming Interface) to link to other online resources.

Summary

APO is popular as a digital library and as a news-alert service. The site gets traffic of over 80,000 visits per month and has more than 16,000 subscribers to the email newsletter. A large number of research centres, think tanks and NGOs ensure their content is made available on APO and value its ability to disseminate research findings to a diverse audience of policy makers, researchers, and media professionals. The editors have recently set up a process for research organisations to post their own publications and readers may link to articles through a number of social software sites.

The use of the open-source content management system, Drupal for the APO site provides much flexibility for the future, given that there is an active and growing user and developer community around this system. In addition, Drupal's ability to provide users with customisable alerts and searches provides a much needed aggregation service within an information rich online political space.

The NBN will result in more policy material, in various media forms, becoming available online making aggregation systems such as this even more important. APO could perhaps do more to engage with the formal political workings of government through providing access to formal government policy information. This would require a much more active government involvement in the provision of coherent and usable policy data linking it to others involved in policy formation.

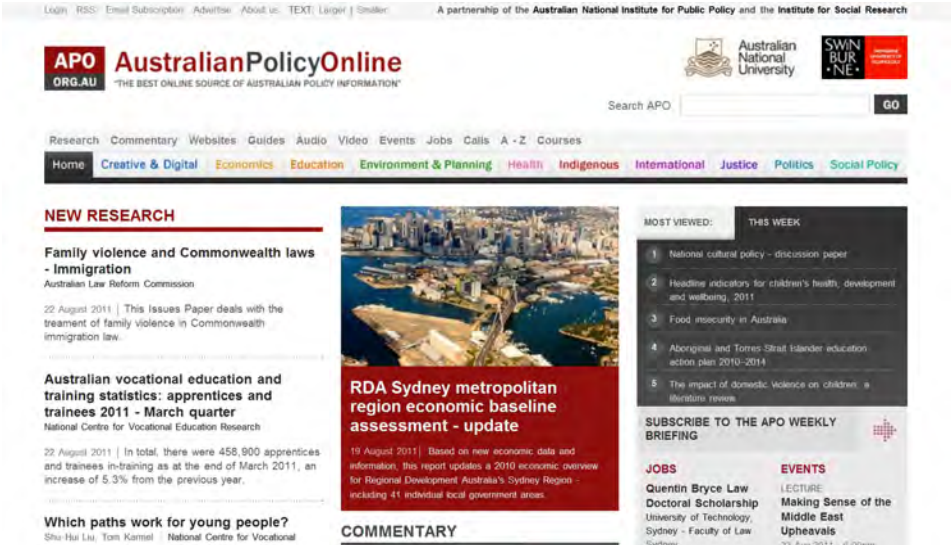

Figure 6: "Australian Policy Online" frontpage

4.2 Below the Line

Region	Australia
Partners	-
Funded by	Self-funded, donation based
Project start	2010
Website	https://www.belowtheline.org.au/

Introductory description

Below the Line is an independent site developed by Benno Rice, a software developer from Melbourne who felt that citizens needed to be more informed about electoral processes and the choices that they provide. Based on a simple but effective idea, the sites main function is to reveal what happens if a citizen vote above-the-line and also, make voting below-the-line easier.

Background

Beno Rice states that although he is involved with the Greens the site is not meant to swing voters in any particular way and if anyone notices something partisan about the site, they are encouraged to report it so it can be corrected. The site was first developed for the 2010 Federal elections and later the 2010 Victorian and 2011 NSW state elections. The site must be updated for each election.[9]

Technological approach

The site uses JavaScript and HTML. It generates a PDF of a set of 'below-the-line' preferences to take to the voting booth and also allows the sharing of an online link of these preferences.

Summary

The site serves as a simple but effective example of what can be done by one individual (with a good idea) in terms of using the internet to engage with the formal political process to empower citizens to make deliberative democratic choices. A system such as this could be further developed to include more contextual knowledge about the candidates, their policies, and their voting behavior in the Australian Parliament. The provision of machine readable lists of candidates from the Australian Electoral Office (AEC) would also assist the development of this project.

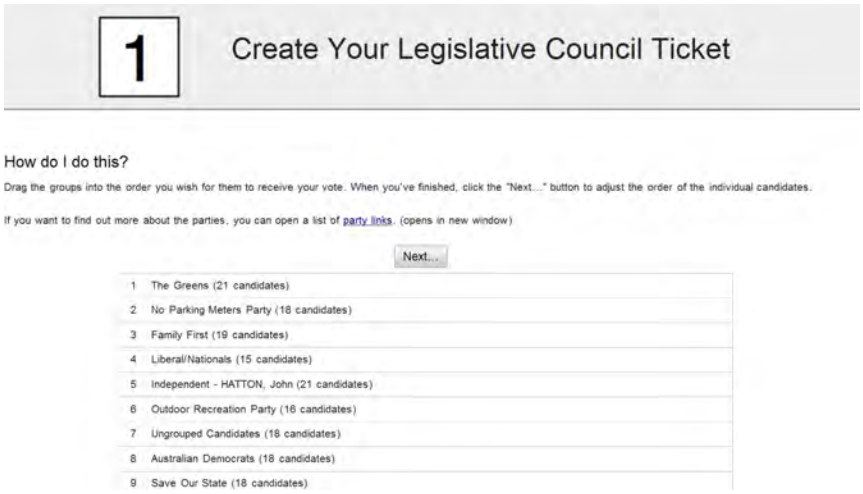

Figure 7: "BelowTheLine.org.au" voting ticket tool

[9] (B. Rice, personal communication, July 12, 2011)

4.3 OpenAustralia.org

Region	Australia
Partners	-
Funded by	Open Australia Foundation
Project start	2007- ongoing
Website	http://www.openaustralia.org/

Introductory description

OpenAustralia.org is an initiative based on the UKs theyworkforyou.com developed by, mySociety. The site enables online access to the digital copy of the Federal Hansard so that citizens can view the record of the workings of Parliament and assess their local member within it. This information is available on the APH website but in a far less accessible format as far as the general public is concerned and OpenAustralia demonstrates how public data can be repurposed effectively for wider public use.

It was also the first website to publish online the Federal Register of issues that might prejudice the politician's decisions in Parliament. As a direct result, the register is now also published on the Federal House of Representatives website.

Background

OpenAustralia.org was inspired by the UKs website TheyWorkForYou.com that promotes political transparency thorough enhanced access to Hansard data. The Australian counterpart was first planned after the launch of TheyWorkForYou in the UK in 2004. Matthew Landauer and Katherine Szuminska then brought the idea to Australia. The project 'OpenAustralia.org' was launched in November 2007 with the help of a number of volunteers.[10] They aimed to make it easier for citizens to engage with formal political processes.

They also developed PlanningAlerts.org.au By entering a street address citizens can see construction or demolishing works in a 2 km radius of their house. And ElectionLeaflets.org.au invites citizens to photograph and upload election leaflets so as to make transparent the way in which political parties campaign on a local level.

Technological approach

Initially, OpenAustralia.org used a screen scraping technique of the official online Hansard transcript.[11] Now the software used for OpenAustralia has two major components, the web application based on code from TheyWorkForYou.com and a web scraper / parser written from scratch to download and parse the Hansard data from the Australian Parliament website.

All of the software developed is free and open source. The web application code is licensed under a BSD type license and the web scraper / parser is licensed under the GNU Affero GPL.

[10] 'About us', OpenAustralia, OpenAustralia Foundation, <http://www.openaustralia.org/about/> (accessed 25 July, 2011)

[11] (M. Landauer, personal communication, June 28, 2011).

Summary

Recently the data format of the Hansard feed has changed meaning it cannot be accessed. This means that OpenAustralia.org has to get a volunteer developer on board or raise enough money to hire one in order to update the sites data conversion tools.[12] This particular project is perhaps one of the most significant and innovative democratic deliberation projects in Australia and one that deserves further investment. The data used in this project could, for instance, be synchronised with the televised viewing of parliament thus taking advantage of high-capacity broadband and enhancing citizen engagement with the formal political process.

Figure 8: "OpenAustralia.org" frontpage

4.4 Getup.org

Region	Australia
Partners	-
Funded by	Members donations
Project start	2005
Website	http://www.getup.org.au/

Introductory description

Getup is an advocacy organisation that relies on a large membership base and a core set of coordinators. A priority of Getup is to hold politicians accountable for their actions and remind them that there is a large group of active well-networked citizens keeping an eye on them. GetUp doesn't associate itself with any one political party, but states it aims for a fairer, more equal, and environmentally sustainable Australia. The

[12] 'Why is OpenAustralia not getting updated', OpenAustralia Foundation, <http://www.openaustraliafoundation.org.au/2008/10/13/why-is-openaustralia-not-getting-updated/> (accessed 25 July, 2011)

organisation is not-for-profit and relies on donations.[13]

Background

Getup was started in 2005 by two Australian Harvard graduates and strives for political independence by supporting 'progressive policies' and lobby against 'bad policies'. This enables them to both criticize and work with all the political parties. The 400,000 strong membership base is encouraged to propose and support key political issues. They can sign petitions, attend events, email MPs, and promote and financially support advertisements.

Technological approach

The issues that members propose on Getup.org, gets voted upon by the member base. With enough votes the proposal will be set into motion. Members have a set number of votes; they can retract and reallocate their votes as they wish, but the votes won't be returned to them until the issue gets a green light or gets deleted.

Getup utilises social software application such as Youtube, Facebook and Twitter to engage members and spread the word. They also put a lot of effort into supporting their campaigns through website development.

Summary

GetUp has become one of the most powerful lobbying groups in Australia utilising the democratic potential of the Internet to its full potential. Part of the success of the organisation is that it is utilises the Internet to mobilise citizens for offline activities. Recent criticisms of the Internet suggest that it promotes 'slacktervism' and trivialises formal democratic structures through the belief that democracy is only about the unrestricted circulation of opinions on Facebook or Twitter. Although these opinions may be important, they are even more important when linked to action that engages with the formal political process.

Figure 9: GetUp! frontpage

[13] 'About GetUp', Getup!, <http://www.getup.org.au/about/about-getup> (accessed 25 July, 2011)

4.5 Australia's National Forum

Region	Australia
Partners	Oxfam, Institute for Public Affairs
Funded by	Self-funding
Project start	2002
Website	http://portal.nationalforum.com.au/

Introductory description

The National Forum is an early example of a platform for furthering democratic uses of the Internet in Australia. It was developed as a free democratic space for citizens to discuss and debate democratic issues. As one of the first generation online political projects, it focus is upon 'online opinions' or the free circulation of political ideas that are not particularly linked to political campaigns nor circulated through social software applications. The *Online Opinion* component of the site, launched in 1999 has a lively community working in a similar way to a 'speaker's corner'.

Background

The original intention of the National Forum was to provide hosted solutions for politicians and other political agencies. The iParliament offered a free-to-use site to all members of parliament, as well as a paid version with more features. However, at this time, politicians were not convinced of the benefits of the Internet, and many wanted their own separate sites. As a result, the iParliament is no longer operational; however other components of the site flourish.

Technological approach

Most of the National Forum including the *Onine Opinion* component was originally built using Microsoft technologies. Later, a content management system was custom built for it. It currently use PHP and open source software for most of their solutions but this is expensive to upgrade and doesn't integrate well with recent social media innovations.

Summary

The On Line Opinion forum has over 10 000 registered users; some who have been member for many years. Its concept is simple but effective and is closely tied to the concept of traditional publishing. Possibly thanks to its long-time standing in the community, the forum participants are rather well-behaved and discussions well-argued Even though the members may use pseudonyms, the pitfalls often associated with having obscured identities do not seem apparent.

Figure 10: National Forums frontpage

4.6 WeGov

Region	Europe
Partners	Gov2u, GESIS, Hansard Society, Institute for Web Science and Technologies (University of Koblenz-Landau), GFI Benelux, Knowledge Media Institute (Open University)
Funded by	EU 7th Framework Programme
Project start	2010
Website	http://www.wegov-project.eu/

Introductory description

WeGov is a European Union, 7th Framework Programme funded-project under the *ICT for Governance and Policy Modeling* theme (€ 2 million). Their overarching goal of the project is to bridge the gap between policy makers and citizens. It will develop a:

> …toolset that allows full advantage to be taken of a wide range of existing and well established social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, WordPress etc.) to engage citizens in two-way dialogs as part of governance and policymaking processes. The tools will make it possible to detect, track and mine opinions and discussions on policy oriented topics.[14]

Background

The EU 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development was launched in 2007 and

[14] http://wegov-project.eu/

lasts until 2013 (with a total budget of € 50 billion)[15]. It serves to integrate parts of the Europe economy into a competitive knowledge-based economy. The WeGov consortium consists of experts in different fields of political engagement and consulting; using both an IT and non-IT approaches.

Technological approach

The WeGov project will develop a toolset that utilise social networking sites to provide a two-way dialog between citizens and policy makers. The tools that are being developed will help policy makers assess opinions and discussions online about policy issues. Policy makers will also be able to seed and stimulate discussions in relevant communities. With the ability to track discussions, policy makers will be able to source the origins, bias and history of the discussions. Dealing with the sensitive security and privacy issues involved in the project are paramount to its success.[16]

Summary

Developing the actual tools in this project consists of only 2 of the 7 'work packages'. The rest of the energy is focused upon making the tools work within a complex, European political context. And part of this is developing ways to overcome language barriers. 'Use-case' scenarios and 'test-beds' are being developed and probable users include the UK health service and UK politicians, the Regional Government of Valencia in Spain, the Regional Authorities in Germany and Federal Parliament, and members of the European Parliament.[17]

WeGov is perhaps is the largest and most complex digital democracy or 'democratic deliberation' project in the world at the moment. It is important because it is based upon understanding how individuals are using the Internet for political purposes whilst not building a new platform to achieve this. It goes to where the people are; and millions of people are already using many different types of social software in their daily lives. The promise for a project such as this in Australia's emerging Broadband Enabled Society, is that the formal structure of the Australian political system will be able to confront the pressing issues in an increasing information rich country, and retain and advance the nations democratic structuring.

Figure 11: WeGov projects frontpage

[15] "What is FP7? The basics", European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/research/fp7/understanding/fp7inbrief/what-is_en.html> (accessed 17. August 2011)

[16] "About the project" WeGov, http://www.wegov-project.eu/index.php (accessed 25 July 2011)

[17] "Scenario definition, advisory board and legal/ethical review" (PDF), see "Public Deliverables", http://www.wegov-project.eu/ (accessed 17. August 2011)

5. Concluding comments: active governments online...

In the popular press, the Internet has been implicated as the catalyst in uprisings in Iran and Egypt and other places without an equal understanding of the deep rooted nature of those events or the normative nature of digital and particularly social media. This is perhaps not unusual, as the Internet is often viewed as an inherently positive force that progresses the cause of democracy whilst not giving equal weight to the less democratic uses of the medium. Evgeny Morozov argues that this is because the Internet entered the popular imagination at a similar time to the collapse of the Soviet Union and thus a misplaced causal relationship—that the Internet causes the collapse of tyrannical regimes—is often made.[18] What is overlooked is that the Internet may also be used to bolster tyrannical regimes; to ease the work of tracking down dissidents or to facilitate the laundering of the money and the tools needed to manage undemocratic activities. In the UK riots of August 2011, some social media tools (particularly Blackberry Messenger) were widely blamed by politicians and the media for fuelling criminality yet research also shows that tools such as Twitter were overwhelming used positively, to report and muster a citizen-response. Like all technology; the Internet is neither good, nor bad, nor is it neutral. It creates opportunities to be used in a myriad of ways that do not always promote the work of the democratic system and the institutions within it. The last observation seems especially important, given that the NBN will dramatically increase the capacity of all Australians to produce and consume politically motivated information and likewise, increase capacity to connect to an at times opposing informational polity in the rest of the world.

Projects such as WeGov, that both harvest and seed social media sites for political opinions can assist in policy formation, but there is still a need to make quality policy information available online to assist citizens in their deliberative processes. Although social media has created a myriad of opportunities to communicate, there is still a need to provide basic policy information that may be cited and shared through new communication processes. There is very little inherently democratic about any communication technology and it is largely how it is structured and used that makes it democratic. Greater consideration will need to be given to these issues in the advent of even faster Internet capacity in coming years especially in terms of unpopular government regulation of the medium.

[18] Ibid.

Appendices

Appendix A: Workshop questions

Task 1: Free-form searching: Carbon Tax

1. Find a site that will help you understand the carbon tax. Note the URL
2. Did you know of this website before searching for it? Where?
3. According to the site, how does a carbon tax lessen carbon emissions?
4. Which political party has the toughest emission reduction policies? Note the policy URL
5. How would you contact your local Federal member to ask a question about the carbon tax? Note the URL
6. Where would you go online to discuss with other citizens the viability of a carbon tax? Note the URL

Task 2: Free-form searching: Wind Energy

1. Find a site that will help you understand wind energy. Note the URL
2. Did you know of this website before searching for it? Where?
3. According to the site what are the benefits of wind turbines? What are the pitfalls?
4. Which political party is the most committed to introduce wind turbines? Note the policy URL
5. A wind turbine is proposed to be built on next to your house. Find a site that allows you to contact a elected political representative and enquire about the noise the turbine may make. Note the URL
6. Where would you go online to discuss with other citizens the viability of wind turbines? Note the URL

Task 3: Free-form searching: Nuclear Energy

1. Find a site that will help you understand nuclear energy. Note the URL
2. Did you know of this website before searching for it? Where?
3. According to the site, what are the dangers of nuclear energy?
4. Which political party has the toughest anti-nuclear energy policies? Note the policy URL
5. Who would you contact to oppose uranium mining?
6. Where would you go online to discuss with other citizens the viability of uranium mining? Note the URL

Task 4: PoliFish

1. Name a political party that supports the carbon tax.
2. Which party holds climate change as the least important policy?
3. Which political party has the goal to achieve 100% renewable energy by 2020?
4. What policy do the Federal Greens have on public transport?

Appendix B: Interviewees for case studies

1. *OpenAustralia.org*: Matthew Landauer, Director
2. *Australian Policy Online*: Amanda Lawrence, Editor
3. *Below the Line*: Benno Rice, Developer
4. *National Forum*: Graham Young, Editor

Interview questions for case studies

1. What was the impetus behind developing the site?
2. What audience is the site intended for?
3. How would you like to further develop the site?
4. Do you envisage that the National Broadband Network will have a great impact on your project?
5. What kind of hurdles/problems have your faced in developing your site?
6. Have you done any user studies and what kind of feedback have you got from users?
7. Do you think users have a greater understanding of political processed through using your system? What would you like to do better?
8. What editorial strategies do you use? (ie. public submitted articles etc.)

Appendix C: Deliberation

Drawing on the work distilled from Coleman and Goetze (2001), Fishkin (1991), and Kavanaugh et.al (2005) the following working definition of deliberation is a useful starting point. This framework of deliberation will be refined over time and used to assess political sites and tools and recommend or design a prototype system.

- **Access to balanced information**—Deliberative processed are primarily concerned with discovering what citizens think about issues once they have become informed about the various options. The information given to citizens must be comprehensive, balanced and accessible.
- **An open agenda**—Deliberative questions are likely to set out the broad parameters of the anticipated discussion and the agenda must be open to revision and expansion.
- **Time to consider issues expansively**—Deliberative exercises must be temporally expansive, allowing citizens adequate time to think through an issue and then work out their position on it.
- **Freedom from manipulation or coercion**—All political exercises are at risk from manipulation, whether in subtle terms such as rigging the questions or in pressuring the participants to arrive at certain conclusions.
- **A rule-based framework for discussion**—Democratic deliberation is not a Libertarian free-for-all. People feel safer and discuss more freely when they are aware of the transparent rules of the debate.
- **Participation by an inclusive sample of citizens**—High quality deliberation can be highly exclusive, but not if it purports to be democratic. Efforts must be made to recruit participants who are representative of those affected by or concerned about the issue being considered.
- **Scope for free interaction between participants**—Deliberative exercises require citizen to citizen interaction as well as citizen to government. Participant must have access to other participants to discuss and debates the main points.
- **Recognition of difference between participants, but rejection of status based prejudice**—Deliberation means that expert opinion does not over ride the deliberative processes of the citizens but become a component of 'balanced information'.
- **Goals**—are the specific goals of the deliberation meaningful and consequential and are they being met?

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