

Citizen Empowerment, Social Media and the Use of Internet Interaction in Policy Making

Author: Peter Fritz

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The genie left the bottle in around 1450/55 with Guttenburg's practical application of printing using moveable type. Bibles first, then self-improvement manuals and then newspapers. By 1900 there were 70 different newspaper titles published each day in Paris alone. Then TV. It could be claimed that TV transmissions of Dallas into East Germany had a role in collapse of the Berlin Wall. Now there are over 1.5 billion people world-wide linked into social media of one form or another.

The hunger for access and influence has not changed. The only thing that has changed is reach.

The question now is not about control; because trying to force the genie back into the bottle will inevitably result frustration, opposition and then revolution. The question now is the extent to which social media can influence decision making – to beneficial outcome.

Our argument is that better outcomes will be derived from inviting social network users to the party. Not by excluding them from it. Better outcomes for society, for government and for business.

I therefore want to discuss our initiatives in Australia where we operate platforms and resources used to enhance engagement and citizen participation in the development of public policy.

I will also review how government authorities and other relevant stakeholders come to value and seek public input in policy development.

To put this discussion in context – I want to touch, initially, on [TCG Group's](#) not for profit initiative [Global Access Partners](#) (GAP) and, in particular, the [Open Forum](#) consultation process.

GAP has been in operation now for ten years. It is the mechanism by which we can initiate dialogue between businesses and government on pressing commercial, social and global issues. Initially GAP operated 'face-to-face'. However, four years ago we finally joined the 21st century and developed the Open Forum website to broaden our reach and extend our capacity for public consultation and discourse.

There are some important lessons we have derived from 'going global'. Some of them, by and large, counter-intuitive.

FIRSTLY - We learned, in general, that it was not easy to win widespread trust and engender voluntary participation.

We established our Internet platform specifically to allow people to voice their ideas. We facilitated access to political leaders and other persons of influence. We targeted mainstream involvement from a large number of people and thought we would have vigorous participation in debates.

We did manage to attract many visitors; but found few who would overtly engage and not many who left their trace. In fact, we saw that people behave on the Internet in the same way as they read newspapers. They come, they look, they read matters of personal interest; but they don't respond with their opinions unless they are being provoked.

SECONDLY - We did eventually recognise that we could provoke participation. In two ways: either by delivering material that provokes by touching on a particular personal nerve; or by making a direct solicitation from the Open Forum editor.

THIRDLY - We confirmed the experience of history that revolutions are led by a small number of driven individuals who want to overturn the status quo, mobilise the masses and, indeed through their actions, create disruption. Even in periods of social and political equilibrium (hopefully getting longer as we mature as a global society) it is still only a small number of committed and passionate people move the levers of society.

FOURTHLY - We gradually came to the realisation that the real potential value of the Internet and social media lies in actively pursuing ways and means to enlarge the population of committed and passionate people willing to drive social change and encourage political initiative. The broader the participation, the more valuable the result and the lower the probability that debate and outcome will be captured by a lunatic fringe.

If those in power place limits, overt or covert, on access, then only the fanatics will engage. If those in power facilitate access, invite participation, seek answers to specific important social, political or business issues, and then clearly demonstrate that participation results in productive outcome ... then the numbers will come and citizen empowerment will deliver a better society. It would certainly be preferable to live in Geneva rather than Minsk.

As I noted previously, we established Open Forum to increase the participation rates we achieved with GAP, to enable people who wish to voice their views to be able to do so. We did that by providing access for people - for ordinary citizens - to their elected representatives and the non-elected representatives, such as public servants and corporate management.

Furthermore, as I believe there is a general disinclination for bureaucrats not to share, we took the process of collaboration outside the hierarchical system. By using Open Forum the government departments involved operate in a less structured, less rigid consultation process. So we have increased the collaboration of public servants by eliminating career threatening visibility.

Take, for instance, the public consultation in regard to Strata Laws, introduced in regard to ownership of housing with common areas, in the state of New South Wales, which commenced in December and runs through to 29th February 2012. Our task is to engage the broader community and have them express their concerns in regard to Strata Laws, but also to come up with solutions and ideas for the future. Since the start of the consultation in mid-December 2011 we have already had over 300 comments and expect to see over 12,000 participants.

Our experience shows that public consultation for policy purposes using Open Forum type structures and capabilities, work. These consultations work for a number of reasons.

FIRSTLY - They work because of the quality of the information that is made available to participants. We give citizens the information they need for reasoned judgement and we provide continuous feedback throughout the process.

SECONDLY – They work because the issues selected are those that lend themselves to crowd engagements and public participation.

THIRDLY – They work because the independence of Open Forum allows key stakeholders to come together on a level playing field to voice their ideas.

FOURTHLY – They work because the process reduces the power of the ‘noisy’ few whose sole purpose for controversy is to promote themselves and their limited agenda.

FIFTHLY – They work because, thus far, beneficial outcomes have been valuable and visible.

Overall, the success of participation enablers like Open Forum is dependent on the passion of citizens. Issues that hit a nerve with a lot of people will elicit wide reach and attention. Niche issues also deserve a hearing. If we can provide a platform for both, we will then contribute to a more participative and well-rounded society governed by the ideas and needs of its citizens.

If there still remains a weakness in the Open Forum process, it is that our reach is still relatively limited. In time, we hope to extend our community of participants from thousands, to tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands.

To do this we are working on an extension to Open Forum - The Futures Project – using global social networks to access the wisdom of crowds and generate proposals for government and business initiatives in the here-and-now that will enhance the probability of achieving preferred outcomes in the near future.

Not predicting the future but, perhaps, shaping it to the benefit of all.

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