

REDISCOVERING THE CIVIC AND ACHIEVING BETTER OUTCOMES IN PUBLIC POLICY

Policy Briefings Number 4

Title: Understanding online engagement 1

Brief Description of the Project:

- Information and communication technology (ICT) offers new opportunities for policy makers wishing to consult the public, in particular by challenging traditional barriers of time and space. Asynchronous (not real-time) technologies, such as online discussion forums, have the potential to allow large numbers of citizens to engage at times of their own choosing without physically having to come together.
- The aim of this project is to understand what happens when large numbers are invited to participate in an online discussion forum that simulates a government consultation. In particular, does it lead to opinion shifts? What effects any changes: the provision of information or the opportunity to exchange views? Who chooses to participate and post their views? How reasoned and informed is online engagement?
- 6,000 participants from the Ipsos-MORI survey panel were selected to ensure a representative sample. These participants were then randomly allocated to 4 treatment and 2 control groups.
- Two deliberation groups were invited to participate in an online discussion focused on their attitudes and government policy towards youth anti-social behaviour and community cohesion. Over 10 days Group 1 discussed issues relating to youth anti-social behaviour (two new issue threads every two days) and then for a further 10 days community cohesion. Group 2 started with community cohesion followed by youth ASB. Background materials (videos, reports, etc.) were provided to inform the discussion.

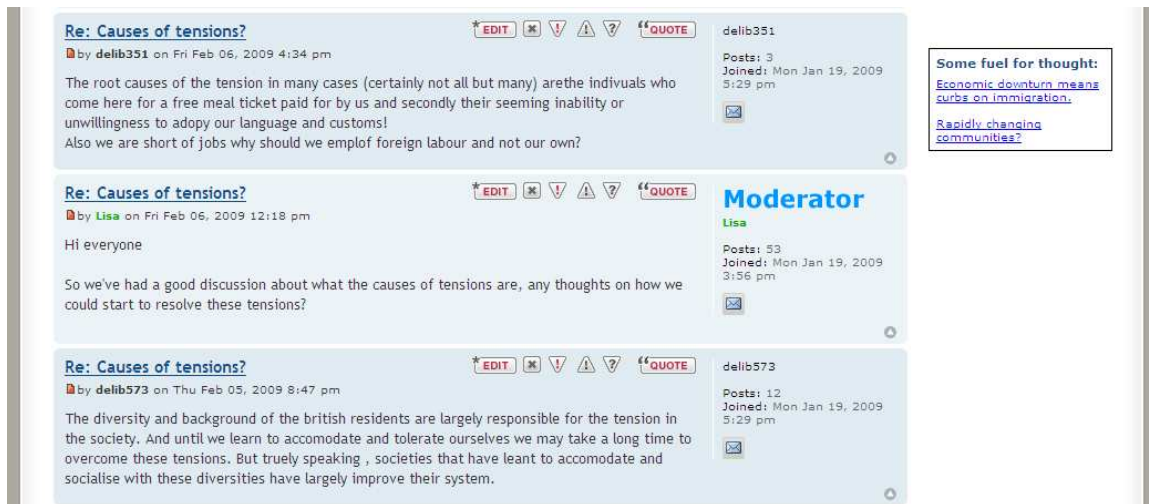


Figure 1: The discussion forum

- Two information-only groups had access to precisely the same boards and followed the same pattern, but were only able to post – they could not read the comments of other participants.
- The final 2,000 participants were divided into two control groups.
- All participants completed three surveys: the first before the experiment (T1); the second after the first issue (T2) and the third at the end of the experiment (T3)

Delib 1	Delib 2	Info 1	Info2	Control1	Control2
<i>T1 survey</i> -----					
Youth ASB	Cohesion	Youth ASB	Cohesion	Youth ASB	Cohesion
<i>T2 survey (youth or cohesion issues)</i> -----					
Cohesion	Youth ASB	Cohesion	Youth ASB	Cohesion	Youth ASB
<i>T3 survey (youth or cohesion issues)</i> -----					

Figure 2: Experimental design

Early Findings:

- The analysis of the online experiment is in its initial stages, thus only early findings can be reported here and must be treated

with some caution. Further findings will be published in future Policy Briefings

- Only a minority of participants (25-30%) participated in the sense of *posting* comments on the discussion boards. Those who posted tend to be female, older, with qualifications and politically-interested. Level of internet use is not a significant factor. Thus online deliberation does not necessarily create a new digital divide, but rather *reinforces existing political inequalities*.
- Those who posted were less likely to read the support materials (short reports, videos, etc.) and thus there is a *question about the extent to which online discussion is informed*.
- Initial analysis of the discussion threads indicates that there were *no significantly offensive contributions* (or 'flaming') and generally participants were respectful to others.

Policy Relevance and Implications:

- The experiment indicates that randomly-selected modes of participation ('mini-publics') can potentially be scaled-up by the use of information and communication technology.
- Light moderation appears to be enough to guard against offensive contributions (flaming), thus reducing the demands on public authorities.
- However, the design of asynchronous discussion boards means that it is more difficult to ensure that contributions reflect the cross-section of the invited sample – it is still the already politically interested who tend to participate in the sense of posting contributions
- Careful consideration needs to be given to how participants receive information. Where there is a choice, participants tend to go direct to the discussion board, rarely reading supporting materials. This raises questions about the extent to which online engagement is informed by policy evidence.

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