

REDISCOVERING THE CIVIC AND ACHIEVING BETTER OUTCOMES IN PUBLIC POLICY

Policy Briefings Number 7

Title: Understanding online engagement 2

Brief Description of the Project:

- This briefing offers further findings from the online discussion forum experiment introduced in Policy Briefing Number 4
- It summarises findings from the analysis of the surveys completed by the majority of the 6,000 participants in the experiment and the use of the discussion boards.
- The briefing focuses in particular on the extent to which participants changed their policy preferences and how they responded to each other's contributions.

Key Findings:

- Only modest changes in policy preference were found in relation to youth anti-social behaviour and only amongst participants who posted at least once on the discussion boards.
- The policy preferences of those who posted tended to move away from legal punishment and heavier policing and towards the promotion of better role models and improved monitoring of young people by adults. But while there was support for such community-based intervention (over legal and policing solutions), participants were less supportive of provision of activities or rewards for young people.
- While there was no flaming (offensive comments), participants tended to post only once to a thread without responding to the posts of others.

- Those participants who only observed the posts of others but did not post themselves (what are often referred to as 'lurkers') did not show any change in policy preference.
- The use of background materials was low amongst those who posted (only 40% viewed materials once or more) and their level of policy knowledge did not increase during the experiment.
- The online deliberation and the modest changes of policy preference that resulted were generally uninformed by policy-relevant information.

Policy Relevance and Implications:

- Online discussion forums have very different characteristics to face-to-face forums which have implications for online engagement strategies.
- Engagement in asynchronous discussion forums tends to be less intense – participants can choose when and if to participate.
- A random-sampling can be used to ensure that a cross-section of the population are invited to participate in policy discussions, but those who choose to post will be self-selecting.
- When forums are designed well (e.g. serious content, moderation, etc.), participants tend to behave in a civil manner towards each other, even on controversial areas of social policy. Anonymity does not lead to flaming. It is possible for citizens to discuss highly controversial public issues like community cohesion and youth anti-social behaviour online.
- It is difficult to ensure that participants are informed about the issue under discussion. In face-to-face events, participants cannot avoid the presentation of policy-relevant information. Online, participants choose their own pathways – they cannot be 'forced' to read information (and if they were this would likely have a negative effect on participation rates).
- Significant changes in policy preferences or increase in policy-relevant knowledge should not be expected when using asynchronous discussion forums to engage the public.

Such forums are more useful for ascertaining the views of the public, although self-selection occurs.

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